

Thursday, August 31, 2006

## News Nuggets

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Research Shows what we have Known All Along: Public Schools are as Good as Private Schools!

In fact, many public schools are better than many private schools.

Money is not the necessary or sufficient condition that produces highly positive student outcomes. More importantly, the effort to pull students from public schools into religious schools with the use of vouchers is shown to be ill-advised, political slight-of-hand.

What makes good schools? The answer is no secret: great teachers.

Every teaching situation requires a skilled and proficient teacher. This is a stated goal of the dreaded No Child Left Behind Act. Unfortunately, NCLB goes about it in the wrong way, possibly because vouchers for religious schools is one of the hidden agendas behind the law.

But, is there any logic that places the best teachers in religious private schools where the pay is more dismal than the public school system? Answer: none whatsoever.

In fact, teaching in the wealthiest prep schools (even if the school paid above average salaries) is no picnic. In schools for extremely wealthy children, stresses are high for both students and their teachers because the parents drive the students to excel. For teachers for the very wealthy, the trade off is an exchange of meddling politicians from afar for the up close and personal meddling of parents (demanding to get their way, and used to getting it).

Enough editorializing! What did the Research Show?

The research revealed that when students were matched for various demographic characteristics, the matching groups of students achieved at approximately the same levels.

Of course the corollary question immediately jumps to our attention, i.e., what kind of science was used in the past to measure different kinds of students against each other in the first place?

Seems like this could be the same twisted logic that jumps to the conclusion that blanket test scores provide a picture of how well a teacher is doing. (Maybe even the logic of comparing students from 40 countries on achievement tests is suspect.)

Anyway, here are the links to this story: Public Schools Perform Near Private Ones in

Study <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/15/education/15report.html?ex=1310616000&en=abe96106c55b306f&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss#articleBodyLink>

Study finds worst performance in Conservative Christian

Schools <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/07/15/MNGI7JVJ361.DTL>

Link to the full report <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/20060715report.pdf>

Of course, not everyone agrees that our teachers are competent, hardworking professionals. And, our elementary teachers seem to teach better than our middle school and high school teachers; at least when compared our students to students in foreign, industrialized countries (if you inappropriately use students' test scores to measure teachers in the way that politicians and school district administrators do).

For a particularly scathing indictment of our school system at their worst, follow this link. [Link to the view that school districts need competition.](#)

Or, check out our book review in this newsletter issue where Paul A. Zoch paints a compelling picture of the failure of American education based upon false assumptions that were promoted and indoctrinated by the Progressive Education Movement. [Link to the 8-31-06 Book Review of Doomed to Fail.](#)

Implications

If we want to measure teachers' performance, we should measure teachers' performance. As we have noted in previous newsletters, measuring students' test scores is inappropriate for judging and evaluating teachers. [Link to The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing article.](#)

And, when we measure teachers performance, we need to include some scaled score for "Newbie" teachers. No scientific rationale justifies measuring the student outcomes of classes taught by a beginning teacher against the outcomes of a master teacher with three to five years of experience.

In fact, lots of support, tender-loving-care, and patience are needed to upgrade a Newbie teacher to a master teacher level. When a Newbie leaves a college school of education as a certified Newbie teachers, he or she has little more than the ability to talk the jargon of the trade in their toolkit. A college education degree is only a "ticket to play", with little of the real experience that is needed to perform the actual skills required for day-to-day output as a "all-things-to-all-students, master-of-everything-under-the-sun; when in fact, the practice, integration and habit development of most instructional skills are learned on the job.

There are ineffective teachers working on great campuses, and there are great teachers working wonders in spite of ineffective principals.

Because of biases and because of the polarizing opinions, people from every angle of this debate will probably be able to use some part of this research report to trumpet their own viewpoint (just as we are doing here).

And, there may be a level of ambivalence on all sides, such as the Classroom Toolkit policy of wishing to protect our public schools while at the same time removing them from the muck and mire of bureaucracy.

The Real Distinction

Of course, we have to draw the distinction between the competencies of teachers and between the competencies of the school districts that they teach for.

And, it may not be that government schools are monopolies that is at the core of how poorly American high school students perform (in comparison to other countries), but that our school districts (and the government that pulls their "puppet's strings") are bureaucracies.

Of course, to the knowledge workers who finds their jobs outsourced overseas, it doesn't matter what the cause behind how overseas knowledge workers became more skilled than our workers.

And it won't matter what the cause, to the cities and towns where local companies loose business because foreign companies earn contracts in global competition. When overseas workers are more skilled than our local knowledge workers, who can blame companies from wanting to work with companies with the best-trained and most productive employees.

Looming Economic Defeat of U.S. Businesses?

This looming defeat of American businesses is avoidable, if we empower our teachers and teach our students to their potential.

But, since we don't expect our politicians or our school districts to empower our teachers, Classroom Toolkit provides the tools to help teachers empower themselves.

Even though politicians and school district administrators continue to place barriers and obstacles to great teaching in front of teachers at every turn; teaching still is a great privilege (some would say that teaching rises to the level of a blessing).

Contributing to the welfare and long-term success of our students by teaching, instructing and sharing our knowledge, skills and abilities is contributing to the long-term success of our nation.

I'm sure that politicians and school district administrators want our teachers to excel, even if they don't know how to get out of the way and let our teachers teach.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in News Nuggets at 12:51

## Short Article

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Nine Ways to Recognize a "Learning Classroom"

Test scores are not the only way to tell if a your classroom offers a rich learning environment for your students. In fact, test scores are possibly one of the poorest ways to gauge how learning is progressing, and these test scores darken your classroom door too late in the school year to do much about learning that's gone awry, anyway.

Here are authentic indicators of instruction that is going right in your classroom:

Students ask each other a lot of questions

The best indicator that instruction is meaningful and "sticking" in the minds of your students is found in the hallway, cafeteria and playground; not derived from the weekly test.

When you hear students talking about the lesson, asking questions of each other, and questioning information that you presented because they found logical or factual discrepancies; then you know that instruction is on the right track

Students are listening to each other

Students listening to each other means that a teamwork atmosphere has been established, and that everyone is respected for their contributions.

Besides mirroring the real world-of-work that students will one day enter, 80% of the time, team thinking will prove that many brains produce richer results than individual, "go it alone," thinking

Teacher and Students Explain their Thinking

The thought process is transparent in a learning classroom, and everyone feels free to share not only their ideas, but their thinking

Debate can be lively, but, the atmosphere has to be one of tolerance for others' ideas and acceptance that give-and-take idea exchanges are healthy, stimulating and refreshing

Students have access to relevant, accurate and intellectually stimulating information

Information resources are similar to minerals and organic fertilizer in the soil. An abundant crop of ideas flourishes if nourished with knowledge, facts, concepts, ideas, images, sounds, graphs, charts and other idea-communicating media.

Students understand how the ideas and concepts connect to their world and relate to each other

The ability to chunk information into categories and manipulate meaning elevates learning above the burden of processing multitudes of discrete facts to a strategy of collecting related and understandable concepts

Students use communication shortcuts and code-words of shared understanding

Using communication shortcuts and code-words demonstrates that learning has reached a meta-level.

Educational jargon is an example of these communication shortcuts, "if only teachers from over yonder really knew what the term means...like we do."

A small group, such as a learning classroom, develops a local meaning for its own jargon.

One "gotcha" exists for teachers who teach the same class more than once a day. It is easy for the teacher to confuse the shared understandings of the second class by introducing derivations of meaning developed by the first class.

The solution for this trap is to ensure that all classes of the same subject that you are teaching are communicating with each other through a variety of means

Teacher and students take learning seriously

Everyone accepts responsibility for learning, and everyone keeps track of learning progress in tangible ways. Everyone helps everyone else to learn.

The distribution of accountability for learning resides with students as well as teachers; and students become responsible for helping the teacher to learn, too.

Disagreements are addressed in a transparent, open and civil manner

Everyone learns when differences of opinion are acknowledged and debated.

Theories, opinions, hypotheses, and contradictory facts are accepted in stride

Pride of ownership in a learning classroom is similar to copyright; i.e., the form of unique expression can be copyrighted, but ideas cannot be owned. Ideas are "community property"

The teacher and students are motivated by learning and external rewards are incidental

The teacher and students become so involved in the learning process that working for rewards is ignored

Students are so involved in learning that punishments designed to force them to comply are unnecessary

Everyone's innate desire for mastery and achievement is constantly fulfilled, and learning for the sake of learning is exhilarating enough to sustain itself

When you have established a learning classroom; you, your students, and everybody else, knows it.

Adapted from Ellsberry, James. 10 Ways to Recognize a Learning Organization. District Administrator, November, 2004. P. - 87)

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

## **Feature Article**

**Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: A High-Stakes-Test-Objectives-Driven Classroom**

Teachers who teach a High-Stakes-Test-Objectives-Driven curriculum, driven by fearing-for-their-jobs principals and an aggressive and odious benchmark testing program; do not realize that they are gambling with their students' future. On the surface, teaching to the test seems to have "face-validity" but there are several insidious characteristics of this strategy that are similar to a "Ponzi Scheme."

Of course everybody knows that Ponzi Schemes are illegal in the U.S., but, it is the U.S. Government that is (inadvertently?) pushing these short-sighted strategies under the guise of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Here is the classic definition of a "Ponzi Scheme."

"The Ponzi scheme continues to work on the "rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul" principle, as money from new investors is used to pay off earlier investors until the whole scheme collapses."Source: US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Link to SEC source

Teaching to the Test is not Taking Students' Money: How does the Ponzi Scheme Definition Apply?

The classic high-stakes-test-objectives-driven curriculum is similar to a Ponzi Scheme on two dimensions:

This curriculum scheme borrows against students' future learning by focusing upon short-term payoffs instead of building upon a solid foundation for learning.

This curriculum focuses upon short-term memory training on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, the kinds of learning tasks that are the most quickly forgotten

This borrowing against the future is most evident when students who excel at test-taking discover (later on in the real world) that they are less than competitive in the job market.

For example, Texas spent about a decade testing "writing skills" with the now defunct TAAS Test (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills). During that time, all Texas students learned to master the art of formula writing so that they could write to the high-stakes prompt.

Unfortunately, Texas trained a half-generation of job candidates that lacked basic writing competencies in the job arena. Here you see how the future cost of lost jobs, unearned raises, or unpaid bonuses falls due when the

Rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul system collapses.

And this does not include the costs to students who must take business writing courses to keep their jobs, or the cost to employers who have to pay for training to teach their employees (who aced the TAAS Writing Test) how to write. And, what about business lost when poorly written proposals were submitted according to the "formula?"

Is a Focus on Short-term Memory Skills "that" Shortsighted?

Industrial-age, factory-floor education has always focused upon facts and figures, i.e., knowledge and comprehension. But, Benjamin Bloom suggested that other types of learning were more important.

Link to the learning domains of Bloom's Taxonomy

Application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are considered to be "higher-order" thinking skills.

And, even though newer high-stakes tests claim to focus upon questions that seem to require higher-order thinking to come up with an educated guess, high-stakes test proponents fail to notice that Benjamin Bloom's hierarchy contains two other domains, i.e., the affective and the psychomotor domains.

A curriculum that focuses upon paper and pencil test practice doesn't have time for the reports, performances, presentations, hands-on experimentation, student projects, peer mediation, service learning, arts education and all the other meaningful experiences that broaden and deepen a students' intellectual and academic world. Students need to stretch their creativity and their perceptions as they integrate and manipulate intellectual, emotional and hands-on models of mastery and achievement.

Students are shortchanged if their world view is narrowed to the drab and dingy perceptions of the professional test-item writers. Students are conned if they learn that there is one and only one "right" answer, or if they learn that all of life's skills boil down to how well you answer test questions.

Focusing on a high-stakes-test curriculum leaves students impoverished in thought, in a similar way to how investing in a Ponzi Scheme leaves them financially hurting and longing for their vanished, hard-earned money.

A Warped Numbers Game

In addition, the focusing upon a test-objectives matrix (grid/ printout) to drive instructional activity choices is a "the gambler always loses" scam.

A teacher's odds for a positive student outcome payoff are better in a dice game or at the roulette table than following this instructional hustle.

Here is what is wrong with the numbers.

Let's say that there are 50 high-stakes reading test objectives and 80 high-stakes test math objectives.

Let's also agree that the high-staked reading test will be administered 125 days after the school year, and the math test will be administered 150 days after the start of the school year.

This provides approximately two days per objective, if all students are present each and every day.

The Gung-ho Newbie teacher who wants to please the high-stakes-harried principal is going to track every data point and use spreadsheets to keep up with the progress of 20 students.

Of course, the teacher lines the objectives up and schedules two days for each in succession.

This means that the teacher doesn't dare to skip the grading of every reading and math practice test each night so that those students that need extra tutoring can be helped the next day.

Soon, however, a backlog of students who have to make up "work" for missed objectives develops. Fortunately, there are days off for Thanksgiving and the Winter Solstice/ New Year holidays. Those students who fall behind can use these days to catch up by doing the extra homework. "Won't those students be grateful that I help them pass the high-stakes test," the Gung-ho Newbie teacher thinks.

Of course, in the march to "cover" all the objectives in time, this high-stakes-test-driven teacher has to tramp on art, music, creative expression, student projects and any fun activities. "How can students have fun when they keep falling so far behind?" the Gung-ho Newbie teacher thinks.

But, guess what. By the time that the students get to objectives 35 or so, they have forgotten objectives one through 25. No one pointed out that students forget stuff that they only see twice.

And, oh yea! the Gung-ho Newbie teacher is spending so much time entering data, sorting students by objectives mastered and missed, and grouping and regrouping students that spouses and significant others tire of begging for affection and attention from the always working Newbie, and seek satisfaction elsewhere.

What if the Test-Smart Teacher "Covers" all the Objectives All the Time?

The really industrious Gung-ho Newbie (probably one with no significant other) who can devote 24x7 effort to this testing strategy can build enough tests for at least one can be given each week that covers everything.

Of course, this teacher has to write all these tests because, after buying all the grade level test books at the teacher's store (six weeks and \$200 later), the supply ran out.

But, after 16 weeks of this "artificial intelligence," the students' affection span dwindles to next to no empathy for the teacher (or for each other).

Tempers flare at the slightest glancing provocation, and disgruntled, unhappy children rue the day that they were placed in that class.

Conditions become so odious that the only sweet revenge that the students can muster is to slack off on the real test to lodge their futile protest.

And what could be sweeter than to strike their tormenter where it really hurts, with poor test scores for the class affirming

that they "had a lousy teacher."

Are there any other Insidious Issues

Another submerged, under the radar issue, kept hidden if at all possible is the issue of referring test-challenged students to Special Education to the maximum amount that the teacher or campus can get away with.

These clandestine machinations, made in the name of helping the student to be successful, rob students of job payoffs in later life, as well as self-confidence and peer acceptance in their immediate future.

Of course, school districts and state education bureaucracies have caught on to this diversion-from-the-test tactic, but their vigilance has driven the practice underground more than eliminating the practice.

Other losing bet is the negative bounce that students' and teachers self-confidence and self-esteem takes as a bad draw of the benchmark test cards is played.

Benchmark testing, for any but the most academically talented students, brings a "lose/ no win" reward for weeks of endurance and boredom in practicing for the high-stakes test.

Of course, repeated benchmark testing jades students in stages so that they are turned off and unmotivated by the time that the "for real" test darkens their horizon.

See our previous newsletter article...Link to The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing article.

Another Ponzi Scheme-type outcome is what occurs the minute after the high-stakes test is administered. Everyone knows that the school year is over, even though there may be 30 or 65 more school attendance days. After wasting most of the school year studying for this test, no one has the motivation, desire or inclination to squander the rest of the year preparing for next-year's test; or for study of any kind, for that matter.

Equally unethical is the practice of focusing on only a small number of students, the students whose test objectives mastered patterns indicate that they are close to passing.

These "on the cusp" students receive an inordinate amount of attention, while students whose pattern of mastery of test objectives is very low are abandoned. The rationale is that no amount of effort will help those low students to pass, so why not focus your finite attention on the students who have a chance of passing.

And, the cumulative abandoning of these "low performing" students, passed over as hopeless, year after year, is robbery of the lowest order.

Stamping out Waste, Fraud and Abuse

Just say, "Yes" to empowering students and their teacher. Make learning dynamic, creative, artistic and real world.

Communicate with student about what is exciting to them, and find ways to integrate student interests to the curriculum.

And, adopt some version or iteration of the "Golden Rule." If would like for others to treat you with dignity and for others to teach you what is important for your life; then treat them kindly, eliminate unneeded stress from your classroom, and bring your investment (or gamble) in high-stakes-test-practice to a minimum level, a level of risk where it doesn't matter if you lose.

Remember, if your test study scheme robs students' of their future prosperity, you have really let them down. Protect your students from the scam of the Ponzi-style, rob Peter to pay Paul, dice roll of high-stakes-test practice.

Remember, "high stakes" means that everything is riding on one throw of the dice or one spin of the wheel.

Help your students invest in solid, low-risk, high-payoff learning instead.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

## Quick Tips

Develop or Upgrade your Classroom Library

Make a classroom library a focal point in your classroom, and partition the area in some way from the rest of the room. The space should be large enough to accommodate five or six students in a comfortable manner. How do you make the space comfortable? Carpets Beanbag Furniture Soft Chairs Pillows You also need shelves and an organizational system. There is no "best way" to organize the library, but you (or preferable the student librarian) need/s to be able to put books back in their place each time.

You also need to be able to display books in two ways.

With the spines facing outward (like regular book shelves for most of the books) With the cover visible (especially covers with exciting art work)

Other display tricks are: Staggered displays Hang small books from clothes pins from lines stretched between two points, or from lines dropped from the ceiling Modular storage such as crates, cubes, etc.

Decorations can include: Posters Student art (particularly theme and book related art) Puppets and stuffed animals (for younger students) Your library needs about five to eight books per student. This translates to 160 books for a class of 20 students.

When constrained by the volume of your teacher's pay, it can take several years to build a classroom library, But, you do not need to purchase all these books at retail prices. Sources for classroom library books include: Flea Markets Garage/ Lawn/ Yard Sales Bound classroom anthologies Gifts Scrounged books from teachers who are leaving Bay Lots (Note: purchasing individual books on eBay(TM) is inexpensive, but shipping costs increase the final price) Purchased from any district classroom budget allotment (if these still exist for your district) District grants Donations from churches and civic

groupsPurchase of books from your local library (Public libraries often sell donated and pulled-from-circulation books at affordable prices

But, there should be fun, exciting, stimulating books in your classroom library; not just non-fiction titles. And, make sure that the books span a range of reading levels, i.e., some books (Baby Bear Books) will be easier to read, some books (Papa and Mama Bear Books) will be a challenge for your students to read, and most books (Teacher Bear Books) will be just about right.

Books do not need to be the only materials that are available in your classroom library. Tapes, CDs and DVDs may also be available, particularly if you have the equipment for playback of these items.

Rules for the use of the classroom library need to be similar to that of a campus or public library, i.e., quiet and relaxed enjoyment in a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere. You will also have to set rules about taking books home, or allowing students to store a book at their desk for a few days. Very few students will steal a book, but some students will misplace (and forget about) a book. Decide how much loss you are comfortable with, but expect that your losses will be small.

Even young children can figure out that if all the books were to disappear from the classroom library, then the teacher will find something less delightful for them to participate in. It is to everyone's benefit to keep this happy space clean, neat and well furnished

Yes, a classroom library gobbles up a substantial amount of classroom real estate, but, dedicating space for a classroom library is worth the investment.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Quick Tips at 08:00

## **Top Tips**

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"We've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'"

Tender, loving care seems to be in retreat in our school districts, and even in some of our classrooms. Whether it is the backlash of test-stress, the anger of children towards teachers for failing to protect them from being beat up by the high-stakes bully, or the estrangement teachers feel towards students because of "hands-off" policies against hugging (due to the fear of being accused of sexual abuse); the vision of teaching as a caring, gentle art seems in decline.

"Don't smile before Christmas" always was a misinterpreted maxim. But, teachers attitudes changed from the old days of, "Kids will be kids", to "These smart kids who won't learn are jeopardizing my job." This hidden attitude shift seems to have developed into a "cold-war" type tension between teachers and their students.

Here are ten suggestions for restoring the "balance of power" in education to "balanced loving, caring and nurturing."

Let's "Bring back that lovin' feeling." into our schools.

Resurrect your Mission

Remember the reasons that you entered the teaching profession.

Focus upon your values and ideals.

Remember how you cared for children and how precious you valued them to be

When you look for and perceive the positive, noble, redeeming qualities within every student; you can always discover worthwhile traits

Clarify your Goals

Define your mission in terms of goals that you can measure, preferably with countable numbers

Keep your goals simple and doable

Make it a point to perform one act of kindness and caring each day, with no expectation of a reward or payback

Map (integrate) values of kindness and caring into even the most tight-ship, test-factory-output goals

Build a "What's in it for Me" Case for your Students

Explain the personal, tangible benefits that your students will enjoy from learning

Make sure that these benefits are framed upon your students', not your goals

This will take analysis, and you will have to listen to your students, both to what your students say and don't say.

Map Points of Mutual Benefit

Know where good teaching and your students' aspirations intersect, and focus upon delivering what your students value in ways that meet campus and district curriculum goals

Become proactive in helping your students learn what they need to learn

This step only requires creative integration. (If you can integrate technology without training or dependable, working equipment; you can help your students with learning that matters to them.)

Select Instructional Activities and Learning Tasks

This is often a trap for teachers who allow activities to drive instruction.

On the other hand, avoid "Analysis-Paralysis" where you are unable to start until you know for sure. Do something and keep your fingers on the pulse of your students' learning

Be ready to adjust

Ensure that more benefits accrue to your students than "just passing the test."

### Build a Reusable Library of Tools

Train your students in the use of modular tools and forms

Demonstrate how the use of these tools streamlines learning and makes learning easier for your students

Point out the benefits for students, now, as well as for long term, life-long benefits

Understand that even the most estranged students appreciate (even crave) consistent structure and predictable procedures

Train your Students in Standard Procedures

By standardizing on modular learning tasks, you assist your students in feeling good about their mastery and achievement

Feeling good about mastery and achievement increases your students' self-concept and self-esteem

Increases in self-concept and self-esteem build the capacity to care and share (for both teachers and students)

Consider Every Project a "Pilot Project", and Let your Students Know that they have a Special opportunity to Participate  
This "specialness-feeling" is called the "Hawthorne Effect"

Feeling special and being singled out for caring (either as a person or as a group) creates a natural flow of good feelings that make effort (and learning) easier and enjoyable

Expand Every Procedure that Works in Creative New Ways and Give Credit to your Students

Allow serendipity and unplanned for good fortune to blossom as you are relaxed, spontaneous alterations in your plans

Learn from what happens by holding to an attitude of learning by discovering what is, instead of labeling outcomes that differed from your plan as "failures"

Repeat each Success and Lavish Praise on your Students

Praise is the premier method for communicating respect, caring and the positive value that you hold for students

Ensure that your praise is consistent and heartfelt

Be completely honest with praise, and do not use praise to manipulate or reward students (Students will see through shallow manipulation, and recovering trust afterwards will take longer than the school year is long)

If you loose your students' trust, the school year will seem to drag on forever, and both you and your students will feel as though the year will never end

With an atmosphere of caring and trust, the school year will breeze by; and everyone will hold sweet, fond memories of their time together

Remember, it is still possible for you to talk "test-tough" at faculty meetings and curriculum planning sessions and still demonstrate caring and kindness toward your students when you are alone in your classroom.

Having students who like you is still the easiest way to motivate high student achievement, even though the school's culture may frown upon any procedures that fail to "toughen the students up for test readiness."

So, bring back that lovin' feelin', before the joy of teaching is "gone, gone, gone."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 07:00

## Teacher Resources

### National Atlas.Gov: Maps your Way

The National Atlas is another site where your tax dollars really are working

Since the site is taxpayer supported, and teachers pay what seems like an extraordinary amount of their pay as taxes, it makes sense for teachers in all classes to use this site whenever they can. What can you do on the National Atlas site?

You can customize maps and print them, adding layers of information. You can also play with interactive maps, download data for a GIS, and order large maps for your classroom or office.

Link to the National Atlas site.

You can spend hours playing with these interactive maps, but why not let your students explore the maps, develop hypothesis, test their assumptions, and share their conclusions.

### Creative Teaching

The possibilities seem endless for using a tool like this for all kinds of content area subjects on all sorts of levels.

If a teacher can spend hours pondering the "What ifs" generated by the layers and combinations of these interactive maps, so can students.

This resource can be used for all manner of creative teaching, with all sorts of graphic organizers to structure the inquiry, with all sizes of student-project groups, in learning centers, and even for lab assignments and homework.

You might create daily oral language, math and vocabulary activities around these layered maps. You might even create homework assignments around these maps.

And, just think, for every use that you devise, your students can come up with at least 20 more...if you encourage them and empower them.

Check our Website for other creative and time-saving ideas. Link to the Classroom Toolkit Website.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Resources at 06:00

## **Book Review**

Doomed to Fail: Subtitle: The Built-In Defects of American Education  
Author: Zoch, Paul A. ISBN: 1-56663-567-5  
Format: Hardcover  
Pub. Date: 2004  
Publisher: Chicago: Ivan R. Dee  
Pages: 237 pages  
Cost: \$26.95 (List)  
Available: Amazon at as low as \$6.05 (new) - \$12.58 at eBay(TM)  
How can the most expensive-to-operate school system in the world achieve success results that are eclipsed by other nations?

Either the other countries have smarter students, better teachers, wiser leaders and more streamlined bureaucracies; or, there is something wrong with American education.

What's going on? Let's look at the possibilities...

Students in one country are just as smart (or dumb) as students in another country. The distribution of intelligence seems to follow a normal distribution

Actually, the United States has better teachers who work harder and do more; teaching about 120% more hours per day than teachers in other industrialized countries

Leadership skills for U.S. district administrators also seem to follow a normal distribution, although, there is a drain of competent leaders from U.S. schools to higher paying professions; whereas, in other industrialized countries, teachers are paid well

Bureaucracies are bureaucracies, i.e., inept in most areas of operation except the generation of paperwork and red tape. Bureaucracies tend to force creativity, self-expression, excellence and achievement toward the mean, i.e., mediocrity. Since "There must be something wrong with U.S. education" is the only one of "causal culprits" left standing, this hypothesis therefore is proved!

Actually, it should be easy to tell that something is amiss in U.S. education because there is a "teacher shortage", due to the fact that so many teachers leave the profession within the first three years.

If as many firefighter recruits left the force, our cities would be smoldering cinders and smoking ash. If as many recruits left the police force, crime would be rampant in the streets. Hmm?

Actually, certain crimes (such as participation in the drug and sex trades) may be rampant in the neighborhoods surrounding the lowest performing schools. But, correlation does not prove a "cause and effect" relationship.

The Books' Topics: Progressive Educational Thinking

The Cult of the Child

Education after Behaviorism

Pedagogue-Centric Education: The Omnipotent/ Incompetent Teacher

The Irrelevant Student

"Textbook Garbage."

Where Education Succeeds: The Absence of the Progressive Paradigm in Japan  
The central themes of this book are:

Faulty assumptions about what education is and how important teachers are to students' learning causes teachers to be mistakenly blamed for failures in the American educational system

Fixing our educational system means changing the role of the teacher to something that is realistic, and making students responsible for their own learning

The history of how U.S. educators came to believe in the failed notions about what constitutes quality instruction is important in devising a cure

U.S. Education will continue to lag behind other developed nations until students are required to work harder and develop the self-discipline that is required for achievement

Keywords:

Progressive Paradigm

Behaviorism and Individualism

Cult of the Child

Pedagogue-Centric Education

Textbook Garbage

Main Idea: U.S. education would improve if students (instead of their teachers) were accountable for their own learning success

The Japanese Model of education produces better results because students and their parents are driven to excel.

A national curriculum and a national system of testing could reverse the downward slide in instructional success, a slide that cannot be stopped by just throwing more money at the problem.

Quotes: "There is no shortage of comment from intelligent and not so intelligent people arguing that better, smarter teachers will produce better, smarter students, and that culpability for the low levels of academic achievement among our teachers undoubtedly lies with our teachers." (p. - x)

"This grossly simplistic and mechanistic view of learning; that teachers determine whether or not students learn; is quite simply, wrong." (p. - xi)

"In a way, Parker [Col. Francis W. Parker] created the mold for the modern superintendent; highly paid (despite his less than stellar educational background) and imperious to his often better-educated subordinates in the classroom, all the while professing a great love for children; but from a safe distance." (p. - 79)

"...By one current, behaviorism, the teacher's responsibility is to provide the appropriate stimulus that will elicit from each

student the desired response; the student is seen in a relatively passive and helpless role, his action determined by the demands of the environment and the stimuli provided by the teacher, who is all-powerful because of his training in pedagogical science. By another current, based on the theories of Dewey and Kilpatrick, students are expected to learn only what they feel a need to learn. Because compelling students to learn something they feel no need for might inflict on them grave psychological damage, all subject must be learned in a natural way, through normal interactions and relations with one's environment, society, and peers, in the absence of compulsion, strain, and formal lessons on academic subjects." (p. - 148 & 149)

"Teachers, after all, are trained professionals in pedagogy, a scientific discipline, with the power; if they try hard enough, if they care enough, if they are not cynical, burned-out, public functionaries, protected in their incompetence by the teachers' unions, and if they will merely implement the latest pedagogical techniques devised by the experts in the colleges of education, acting as impartial, scientific rigor; to make learning natural and easy, even fun for students." (p. - 149)

"It is time for Americans to consider the possibility that the problem of underachievement in the nation's public schools does not stem from the teachers and how they teach, but rather from elements of the Progressive Paradigm that make widespread academic excellence virtually impossible to achieve. It is time to consider the possibility that the chief beneficiaries of this pedagogue-centric educational philosophy are not the students but only the colleges of education and the people in them who promote the Progressive Paradigm " (p. - 150)

"Let there be no doubt about it: the United States looks to its teachers and their efforts, but not to its students and their efforts, for success in education. That being the accepted wisdom, students are free to do nothing more than wait for the teacher to create success for them. Educational reform literature rarely contains the thought that our students are failing primarily because they do not study enough." (p. - 150)

"...Many students in the United States frequently fail to learn even when they have a good teacher, one reason being that they are not expected to engage in the struggle that is sometimes; even often; necessary for gaining knowledge, and therefore don't strive for understanding." (p. - 153)

"It is an ugly and disgraceful fact that the current system of letter grades, in the absence of an absolute, objective standard, is grossly unfair...The current system of letter grades penalizes students who choose difficult courses with demanding teachers, for such students are more likely to earn lower grades than students who choose electives taught by "cool" teachers who don't expect their students to sweat and struggle to meet high standards...The current system, because of the "Lake Wobegon Effect" (the term that describes how most students in U.S. schools are above average), also gives mediocre students good grades they don't deserve, and thus a false sense of competence "(p. - 199 - 200) "...the letter grade system penalizes demanding teachers, for teachers who have high expectations for their students and insist that they work hard for good grades when students in Mr. So-and-so's class have such an easy time--they all get A's and never have to study! The tough teachers in American schools must often waste an inordinate amount of time and energy defending their adherence to high standards; eventually, many simply lose their idealism and give up, having grown weary of incessant complaints from students, parents, and even administrators."(p. - 200)

"Students must understand that going to school is their job, something that most do not now realize. Many students, thinking that it is the teachers job to do what will "make" them smart, feel little need to take their classes seriously."; (p. - 200)

"The knee-jerk tendency in the United States is to charge teachers with incompetence for any perceived failure of their students or their schools. Considering what teachers are expected to do; make students smart without causing them stress, and make their time at school a joyful, emotionally fulfilling experience; teachers cannot but fail and thus incur society's contempt. Placing responsibility for learning on the students, and expecting teachers only to present competent lessons..., might retain many of the large percentage of teachers who leave within the first three years, and might reduce the burnout factor among veterans." (p. - 201)

Issues Addressed by the Book: U.S. students (and their parents) expect that their teachers will motivate them, entertain them, devise novel methods to communicate information and instill knowledge...while the students remain in a passive learning mode.

Descriptions of the Japanese method of education are so "out of sync" to American culture that almost no one would suggest that such a stressful method be adopted in the U.S. (Although the odious testing required by the No Child Left Behind Act is a baby step in this direction. The Book's Shortcomings:

The book is meticulously academic, and few teachers have time to read such a long book, cover to cover. The writing style uses long sentences with qualifiers, but teachers need quick, scannable text.

The history of how U.S. education became mired "in the state that it is in" is important, because "what caused the mess" is important in arriving at a solution to the real problem. However, working-day-and-night teachers need a resource that easily maps to action plans and how-to checklists. That is why Chapter 8, "What is to Be Done?" Pages 196 to 202, are the most important part of the book.

Teachers can always read about the history, later.

Comments: It is easy to assume that the teacher shortage is due to the relatively low pay and long hours that teachers face. It is also easy to point the finger at the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) to find a major source of the inordinate stress that teachers and students are experiencing as the law warps sound instructional design, values and ideals. But, it is harder to recognize the basic social assumptions that underpin our schools' culture of failure.

The comparisons with Japanese and Asian educational systems, while fascinating, do not provide workable, doable maps of what to change in U.S. education. The attitudes and assumptions needed to adopt a Japanese-model educational system as so different from what Americans value that believing that such a system would work here creates a level of "cognitive dissonance."

It might almost be easier to get Americans to adopt an "Eskimo diet" of raw seal blubber than to implement the Japanese educational model in the U.S. Summary: Doomed to Fail offers lots of insights and lots of eloquent passages that paint elegant pictures detailing the reasons that our schools continue to under deliver for our students.

And, Doomed to Fail explains the reasons why our current reform efforts can only fail because they are based upon false assumptions. The language of the book is so well crafted that it would have been easy to provide double or triple the number of quotes in this review. This is an excellent book.

Rating (Four Point scale):

Useful - 4 Applicable - 4 Relevant - 4 Innovative - 3 Original - 3 Interesting - 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Overall Rating - 3.5

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Book Review at 05:00

## Site Strategy

### Site Strategy and Progress

Our flagship Web site, Classroom Toolkit.Com averaged 96 visitors a day during the month of August, 2006. This was almost double last month's daily average. A total of 2,977 visitors accessed 8,570 pages. These numbers beat our previous record (the month of July).

Pages in our site continue to be dropped by MSN (MSN); but our site's pages continue to rank well with the Search Engines.

We have a number of pages in the top ten (First Page of the search results) for four Search Engines: Google - 15 pages Yahoo - 9 pages MSN - 7 pages Ask (formerly AskJeeves/Teoma) - 13 pages

Of these, our Number One ranking (Top site referenced for that search term) included: Google - 8 pages Yahoo - 5 pages MSN - 4 pages Ask (formerly AskJeeves/Teoma) - 4 pages We are working on a plan to distribute two CDs as "ISO images". This will allow us to share our Teacher Time-Saver/ Classroom Planning CD and our Graphics Organizer CD without having to pay for postage.

Current prices for distributing the CDs are:

CD - \$0.23 Sleeve - \$0.05 Cover Printing (ink) - \$0.05 Mailing Envelope - \$0.24 Postage - \$0.63 Total Cost -

\$1.20 Providing every one of our site's visitors a free CD would cost over \$3,500, and more next month. And, we would not have time to write because we would be spending so much time copying disks.

Creating the ISO Image will allow visitors to download the CD image and burn their own copy. Our cost, almost nothing, because we won a year's worth of un-metered bandwidth in an eBay auction.

Look for word about these ISO images on our Blog, Website, and in next month's newsletter.

We are also developing our tutoring site, and will continue to add content.

You can preview this tutorial at:

Classroom Toolkit Tutorials

Of course, the first tutorials will be similar to the CDs, but the tutorials will be more interactive than the CDs.

### A Further Note

Our Newsletter is formatted and published with the Open Source product, Serendipity. Serendipity is really a Blogging system, but we have figured out how to configure it to function as a newsletter system.

This means that the power of this newsletter is available without cost for the software.

Our Tutorials are formatted and published using another Open Source product, Moodle. Look for additional tutorials to be developed now that our July newsletter has been published.

Moodle is a Learning Management System (LMS).

Our only cost for publishing both of these resources is a hosting fee to Go-Daddy.Com for \$3.95 per month.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Site Progress at 04:00

## Open Source for Education

Learning Management Systems: Course Development Software for Free!

Some school districts pay a lot of money for commercial Learning Management Systems (LMSs), although most school districts don't use them. However, some Open Source advocates suggest that school districts turn to free LMS alternatives and offer online courses for their students. Here is Classroom Toolkit's stance on this topic. Note: We have not implemented or tested all of these different software products (we don't have that kind of time, or in the case of the commercial products, that kind of money); but we are developing tutorials that use the Moodle program.

We'll explain the reason for our choosing the Moodle LMS later in this article.

What are these Learning Management System programs, and what do these programs do?

Open Source LMS Programs

Some of the Open Source programs classified as Learning Management Systems (LMSs) include: ATutor&#8482; Link to ATutor&#8482; siteBenefits: Installs in minutes Is W3C Accessibility Compliant (i.e., works with adaptive devices for the handicapped) Complies with the SCORM protocol

Interact&#8482; Link to the Interact&#8482; siteBenefits: Easy to use and Flexible Cost effective and without hidden costs Capable of building online learning communities Can be used as a Intranet portal Open Course&#8482; Link to the Open Course&#8482; siteBenefits: Makes collaboration easy Contains lots of Open Source presentations Small project, so your contributions will be noticed Moodle&#8482;

Link to the Moodle&#8482; siteBenefits: Built in tools include the ability to use Articles, Assignments, Chats, Forums, Grading, Glossaries, Links, and Wikis Lots of activity and the product is constantly being updated Loads of expansion modules and tools. Can be customized with themes to change the product's "look and feel" Scripts available for many Web hosting companies to automatically install the Moodle&#8482; product My Classroom&#8482; Link to the My Classroom&#8482; siteBenefits: Many content area courses and lessons online Membership allows customization for your classes System includes Syllabus, Quizzes, Course Information and Student Information. This project's interface is built on a semester metaphor. These are not the only Open Source LMSs available, but these present a snapshot of the programs that are available.

Some of the LMS programs are small and based upon the work at a specific college. Others are large-scale projects with a world-wide development community. Moodle&#8482; is one of the biggest LMC development efforts.

By just looking at the list of benefits, you can probably guess the reason that we are building our tutorials with Moodle&#8482;.

Another reason that many people choose Moodle&#8482; is that major online hosting companies have automated installation processes that will set up Moodle&#8482; on your Website without additional cost (in only a few minutes).

Commercial LMS Systems

Some of the competing commercial software programs in this category include:

Breeze&#8482; Link to the Adobe Breeze&#8482; siteBenefits: Product uses Flash&#8482;, so most computers have the plug in already installed Monthly and Pay per use Plans Professional Development and Teleconference Modes State of the Art technology Blackboard&#8482; Link to the Blackboard&#8482; Academic Suite siteBenefits: Large installed base, particularly Universities and Large School Districts Content delivery, professional development, communications and assessment Supports standards such as SIF, IMS, and SCORM, and connects with data warehouses and student information systems WebCT&#8482; Link to the WebCT&#8482; siteBenefits: Acquired by Blackboard&#8482;, so WebCT won't be sued Includes pre-packaged content and pre-built quiz banks Provides hosting, technical support and training The commercial LMS products are very expensive. The Open Source programs are inexpensive. How can Open Source software that costs \$60 a year, or less to host, compete with software that costs \$9,000 per year, or much, much (tens of thousands) more?

Answer: Quite effectively.

If these Programs are Free, Why do School District Pay for Expensive Ones?

Districts use the expensive programs because they have the funds to spend. "Funds to spend" are only partially related to costs.

Costs include start-up costs, ongoing costs and technical support costs. For a small school district with only Microsoft&#8482; certified personnel, if they hire certified personnel at all, ongoing and technical support costs may be too high if district staff do not have employees that are qualified to work on the Open Source software.

In the case of Learning Management Systems, there will always be additional costs. Some of these are:

The cost of training staff to use the Open Source application

The cost of paying staff to develop the lessons that will be placed on the Open Source application

The cost of paying for the rights to use lessons that someone else creates

There are also hidden cost savings that are often overlooked. For example, when school districts take advantage of some grants (and especially the eRate program), the money can be used for outside vendors, but cannot be used to pay district personnel. So, it is possible to acquire expensive products with someone else's money that do not have to be funded with local funds. To school district administrators, projects funded with someone else's money look more desirable than better projects that are more cost-effective and more effective. Better educational outcomes seem less desirable if they have to be paid for using local money. (Note: School district administrators seem shy about paying for anything through the use of local money. This results in the "low-bid syndrome" and the "What is the minimum cost/ just make it look like we are addressing the issue" strategy.)

So, you see that "free" has many costs associated with it.

There may be other potential hidden costs associated with a Open Source LMS choice. For example, a commercial company, BlackBoard&#8482; filed a patent that many experts believe was granted in error. Then, Blackboard&#8482; bought up competitors (for example WebCT&#8482; under the threat of a lawsuit for using their patent. Blackboard filed suite against one such competitor that wouldn't sell. (See ATutor&#8482; Forum Article. The districts that can afford

LMSs may want to avoid any patent infringement lawsuit issues, and so they stick with the high-priced products. There is also the difficulty of migrating courses built by any proprietary system to another system. So, once a district has a substantial investment in courses that were built for one system, they are basically locked in to that system. This is a benefit derived from using the Moodle system since Moodle courses can be transferred easily from one online host to another.

And, as you will see, as expensive as these LMSs are, the cost of course content is incredibly more expensive. School districts could not afford to create content for one LMS platform, and then not be able to use the courses that they paid to create.

Of course, Classroom Toolkit (Link to Classroom Toolkit site) advocates free access to a Learning Management System. Openness (transparency) and sharing are ideals that build quality learning experiences for our students. Access to online courses is important for our students, and it is deplorable that our school districts cannot figure out how to offer this instructional benefit to all our students.

Having a commercial company destroy competition and innovation with legal ploys instead of providing innovative learning products at affordable prices and competing in the marketplace by building a "best-of-breed" product is an even greater disgrace.

Note: Lots of Open Source advocates are angry at Microsoft for destroying competitors, even though Microsoft sells its products to school districts at about one tenth the list price of its products.) If school districts were actually offering online courses like they should be doing, there would be a real outcry. But, since most districts are not offering this service, the lack of online course goes largely unnoticed.

If these Programs are Free, Why don't more School Districts Use Learning Management Systems?

Most school districts don't use LMSs, period.

This is a deplorable situation, but a situation that is easy to explain. (No, we are not going to rant about inept bureaucracy or politicians, again.)

The reasons that school districts don't provide this obvious learning resource to their students are:

Creating content, especially online content, takes time...a lot of time

Writing content takes skill

School districts can't afford to pay for the release time that teachers would need to build these courses

If teachers build these courses on their own time, then, teachers expect ownership or compensation for allowing the district to use the course

School district leaders believe that teacher time is free, and they believe that they have unlimited use of that teacher time; therefore, they do not want to pay teachers for building courses

Teachers who build courses using school district computers, even on their own time, probably relinquish copyright ownership to their employer, even if it were not commissioned by their employer to produce the course

Once school districts build courses, they are stingy about sharing these courses with other districts

Of course, teachers in some school districts could build online courses on their own. In other school districts, teachers may have to obtain permission to place anything online, even a course that benefits their students. In some cases, school districts claim all the work that their employees create, whether that work was created on district time or not.

Why did Classroom Toolkit choose Moodle?

Classroom Toolkit provides access to world-class materials for teachers without charge. This means that we do not have a way to pass costs on to the teachers that we are helping.

This also means that all costs must be kept low.

The costs for running and maintaining a LMS include either a server and connection to the Internet, or, Website hosting. Classroom Toolkit uses two hosts: Our original host, from SiteSell; and an additional site from Go-Daddy.com, since the SiteSell hosting company does not offer a method for hosting interactive tutorials or project-based interactive courses.

The Classroom Toolkit tutorials are in development. For a preview of what will eventually be online, follow this link.

Preview of the Classroom Toolkit Tutorials.

Moodle allows capturing and migrating courses from on server (or hosting site) to another. Therefore, any Moodle courses can be saved, moved to new locations, swapped, even bartered.

An example of this ability is the Strategic Open Source Special Interest Group (SIS-SIG) of the Texas Computer Education Association (TCEA). The SOS-SIG established a Moodle Exchange to allow the transfer and sharing of Moodle courses for its members. Link to the SOS-SIG Moodle Exchange

Special Offer: Perhaps Someone will Volunteer in your Area

Here is an idea for your area. It is modeled after an Open Source volunteer effort in Texas where a retired Open Source volunteer (advocate) installs Open Source servers and software for school districts. The Open Source software is placed on older computers, and the district's IT staff are trained at the same time (if they want to be trained).

The cost to the school district, only one day's travel expenses of the volunteer. The volunteer even pays for his own meals.

Here is what the special offer looks like.

Link to volunteer offer to install Open Source Server and LMS software.

This model is one that Open Source organizations and educational organizations should consider adopting for their region.

We also need to extend this effort with a training component so that teachers can learn how to build Moodle®; and other Open Source courses.

Fortunately, the basic skills for building a Moodle®; course are about the same skills as are required for general office productivity software, i.e., word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, and graphics skills.

Teachers Going it Alone

Here are suggestions for teachers who want to use Open Source courses on their own.

You may want to do this to protect and retain ownership of your work!

But beware, some school districts claim ownership of all the writings of its employees; whether the employee develops the materials with the district's equipment or not, whether the employee develops the materials on the district's time, or not.

There are a number of Web hosts that you can use. You can search on the term "moodle hosts" at any of the search engines.

For less than \$5 US, you can host your own site. Link to the Site Ground hosting site. The Site Ground plan comes with a free domain name, and .

Classroom Toolkit has also designed a hosting plan that includes a Moodle®; setup for only \$3.65 per month. The catch is that you have to sign up for an entire year, and the domain name costs \$5.00. Link to the customized LMS hosting plan.

If you would like to design a Moodle®;-enabled hosting plan of your own, you can create an account with Reseller Panel®;. Reseller Panel®; offers a reseller plan that you can customize to your own specifications. The difference with the Reseller Panel®; plan is that you don't have to purchase (or pay) anything until you sell a plan. The catch is the yearly contract requirement. Reseller Panel Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Hosting Program

If four or five teachers joined together, and shared on Moodle®; site, they could use either plan for \$1.25 (or less) apiece per month.

Summary

Real, on-the-ground, actual implementation of Open Source Learning Management System courses is more complicated, complex and time consuming than just using some free software products.

But, if teachers work together, in the Open Source spirit of sharing, online courses can be created with minimal cost.

And, Moodle™ makes it possible to share these courses with teachers around the world.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Open Source at 03:00