Our Uneducated Educators

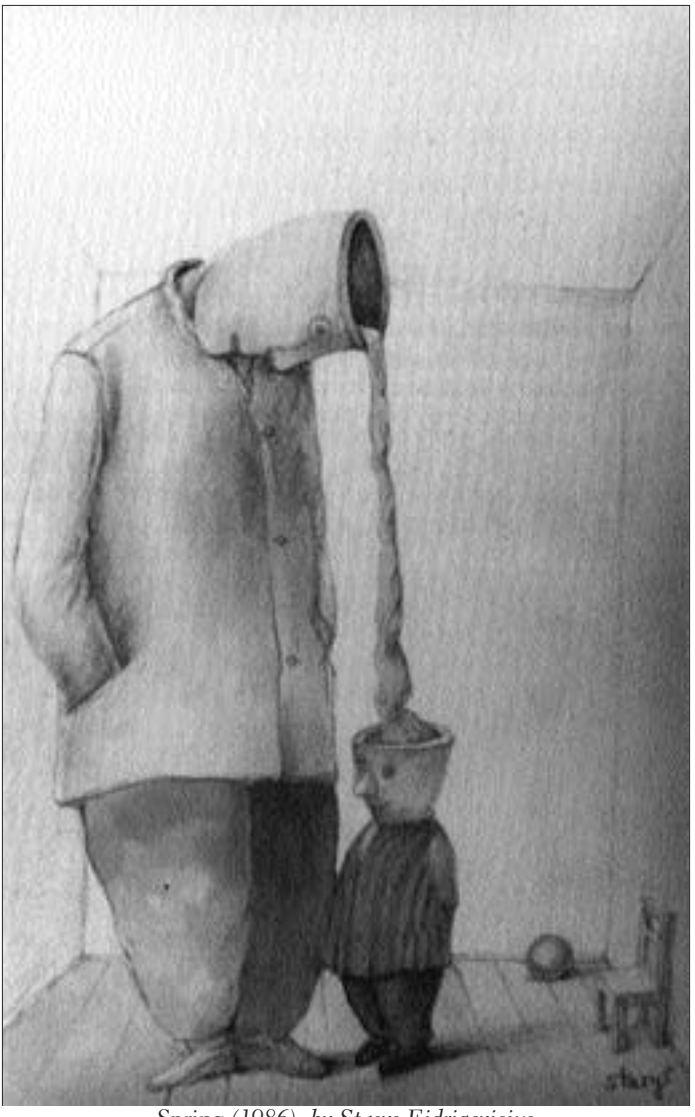
by Paul A. Zoch

There is a troubling paradox at the heart of America's efforts to reform the public schools. After many decades of clamor for change and improved student achievement, one of the few groups that seem to lack any sense of urgency is also one of the most important: the principals and other administrators who actually lead the schools. Having long resisted state-mandated tests as intrusive and inaccurate assessments of "mere" basic skills and contrary to the true spirit of education, they now cite rising scores on such exams as evidence of success. Never mind the evidence of our senses, much less of international comparisons that show American students barely able to outperform their peers in Cyprus. The nation's youngsters are meeting "world class" standards. The principals and the educationist brain trust in the university-based schools of education have the problem largely in hand. Students in Germany, Japan, and South Korea, watch out—graduates of American high schools now read at least at the ninth grade level.

Some light is shed on this paradox if one asks a simple question: who is the best-educated person at your local high school, the person whose sterling academic and intellectual accomplishments serve as a model and inspiration for students and faculty? Most likely it is not the principal or even the superintendent of the district, but the valedictorian or salutatorian of the graduating class, or perhaps another student in the top five percent of the senior class. One of my former students, for example, passed advanced placement (AP) exams in chemistry, biology, American history, English, calculus, and Latin, making the highest possible score of 5 on all but one, on which he scored a 4; the minimum passing score is 3. By passing those exams, he demonstrated his mastery of the subjects at the college level and earned college credit in those fields. Many other students can boast of similar accomplishments. Can their principals and superintendents?

That the answer is a resounding and sardonic *no* points to a grave defect in America's education system: the lack of authentic intellectual and academic leadership in the public schools. What leadership there is sets a standard of academic submediocrity, guided by the principle that it is not important to *be* educated; it is important only to *appear* educated.

The academic and intellectual aimlessness of our schools is a direct outgrowth of their leaders' impoverished academic backgrounds. About one-third of the principals surveyed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in 1987 held undergraduate degrees in business, education, or physical education. (More than half had earlier worked as coaches, including 28 percent who served as athletic directors.) The academic quality of degree students entering education pro-



Spring *(1986), by Stasys Eidrigevicius*

grams is revealed by their low scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), the ticket to college admissions. The maximum combined score is 1600. In 1980, around the time when many of today's younger administrators were undergraduates, the average combined SAT score of education majors was 807, and of business majors, 852. Average scores in other majors ranged from 886 in the arts and humanities to 911 in the social sciences to 1055 in the physical sciences. (Last year, I wrote letters of recommendation for graduating seniors whose combined SAT scores were 1400, 1430, and 1490; the AP wizard mentioned earlier scored 1570.)

We can gauge the academic quality of the remaining two thirds of administrators by examining how graduate students in education score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), a required test for most graduate school applicants. The highest score possible for each of the three sections (verbal ability, quantitative ability, and analytical ability) is 800. In verbal ability, education graduate students who took the test in the period from October 1989 to September 1992 scored 462, placing next to last, 25 points behind the supposedly "verbally challenged" engineers. Nor did education students shine in quantitative ability; their average score of 503 placed them dead last. In analytical ability, they barely avoided last place with a score of 531, one point ahead of those in the "other fields" category. How will our "educational leaders" lead our students to success in math and science after scoring so poorly on a mathematics exam that, according to its designer, the Educational Testing Service, "does not extend beyond [what is] usually covered in high school"?

We need not rely on test scores to assess the academic abilities of these leaders—and, indirectly, the standards prevailing in the academic discipline that has certified them as educational leaders. Consider this memorandum written by a principal to the 150 teachers in the

Texas high school where I work: "Spring is upon us. We need to take time in your classes to re-emphasis the dress code. There are no shorts to be worn." Or this greeting from an administrator who had previously served as a principal in another district:

> Hello, I am the new Tech Prep Specialist in the district. In recent weeks, I have previously had the pleasure of meeting many of you, however there are many that I have yet to make your acquaintance. It will be my personal vendetta to meet each of you and remember your name as well as what you do before the year's end.

Alas, many parents and teachers across the country can report similar incidents. In my school, even a formal document such as the school's student handbook is riddled with grammatical and stylistic errors. It provides one of the few occasions when a teacher can be glad that students read so little.

Administrators are drawn from the ranks of teachers, of course, and at least in this area of competence one study shows that they come from the bottom ranks. In the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, education administrators' average score of 326 in prose literacy put them behind the average score of 333 attained by the teachers they supervise and, in theory, lead. The administrators tied with registered nurses, and surpassed only one professional category: sales supervisors and proprietors.

The dismal academic performance of administrators has not gone entirely unnoticed. In 1989, for example, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration issued a report calling for a radical overhaul of the preparation of principals and administrators. "Faculties and deans in schools of education are frequently embarrassed by the academic performance of educational administration graduate students," the report noted—this in a field where people are not easily embarrassed by low achievement. "Many graduate programs adhere to an unspoken pact that any teacher, even an unsuccessful teacher with marginal academic ability, has an inalienable right to study for an administrator's certificate, and persistent candidates are almost always admitted."

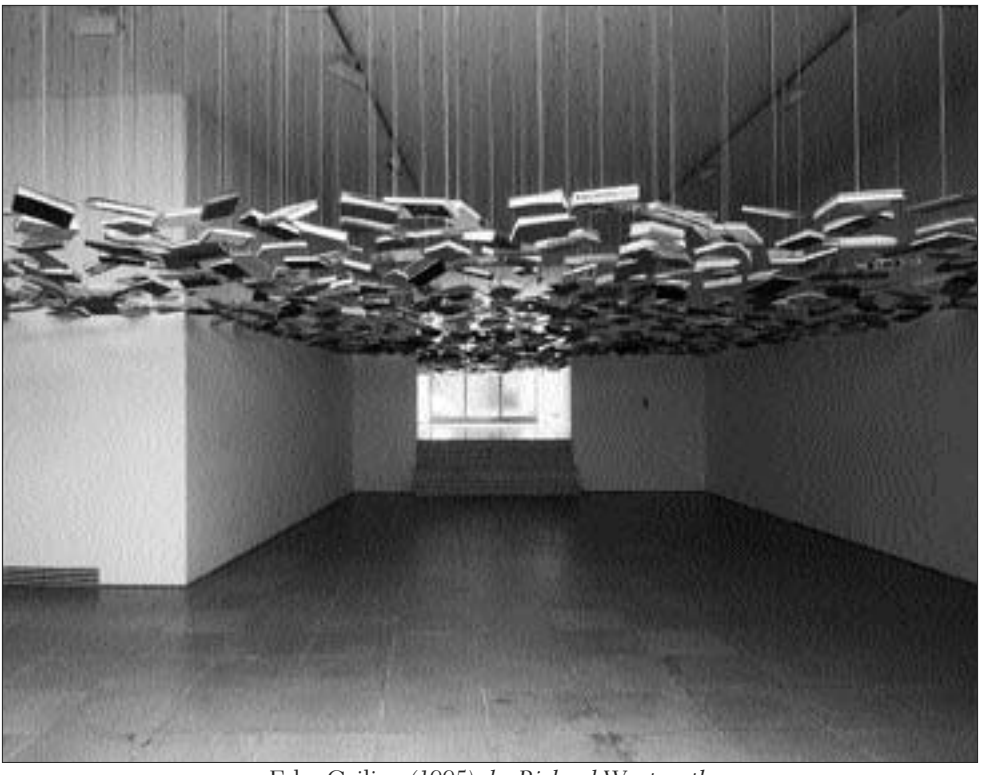
At no time during their own education, whether in high school or college, or in their professional training, are educational leaders required to succeed, as the best students in our schools do, in courses of AP depth and quality in core subject areas. They do not need to be educated; a degree in education will do. That credential is won by taking courses in curriculum, education law, education finance, psychology, and educational leadership.

Running a school or school district is a complicated endeavor, requiring specialized knowledge and training. But apart from necessary instruction in such matters as management and law, our educational leaders are steeped in the intellectual equivalent of astrology, alchemy, and pig Latin. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration itself recommended that the master's degree in education and administrator certificates be abolished. The content presented in such programs, it concluded, is "irrelevant, outdated, and unchallenging."*

A few anecdotes illustrate the infamous Mickey Mouse nature of education courses. A colleague of mine, while

**Our country is awash in products of the education schools. Consider this appalling calculation: Between 1970 and 1993, American institutions of higher learning granted 2,871,292 bachelor's and 2,184,671 master's degrees in education. There are approximately 40 million students in the public schools today. That means there is at least one person with a bachelor's in education for every 13.9 students in the United States and one with a master's in education for every 18 students.*

> Paul A. Zoch *teaches Latin in a public school in Houston, Texas. His book* Ancient Rome: An Introductory History *was recently published by the University of Oklahoma Press.*



False Ceiling *(1995), by Richard Wentworth*

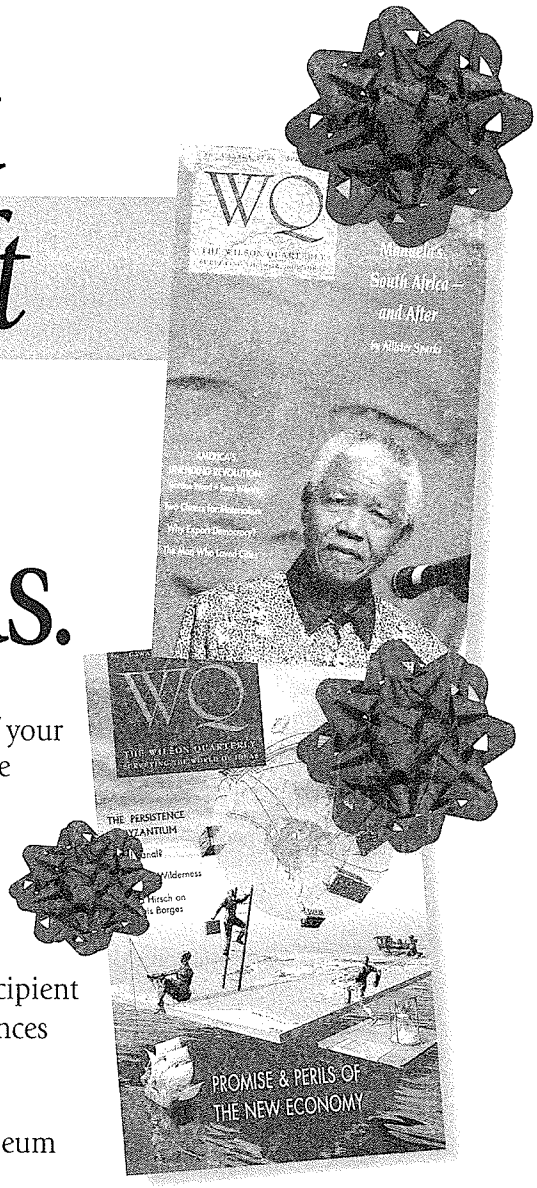
teaching full-time at our high school, was also taking three graduate courses in education at night in pursuit of his master's degree. "Isn't that a lot of work?" I asked him one day, noting that he still managed to go fishing every weekend. He said he never had to study, and was making A's. I asked why he was not doing something more interesting and worthwhile, like getting a master's in his subject, rather than education. "No way," he said, astounded that I would even ask such a question. "I probably couldn't handle just one graduate course in [the subject] while teaching full-time."

A course I took to help fulfill the requirements for my teacher's certificate had a reading list consisting, in its entirety, of one slim book of approximately 100 pages and two articles of approximately 30 pages each. The other education courses I have had, all of which carried graduate credit and, according to educationists, are equal in rigor to graduate courses in other fields, were no more challenging than 9th-grade algebra.

Recognizing some of the weaknesses of today's schools, educationists at universities have been busily churning out books and articles on what makes effective educational leaders and principals. (What were they looking into before, one wonders?) The research shows that "effective schools"—the schools where, generally, students learn what they are supposed to—succeed by virtue of a principal who is an instructional leader animated by a vision of what the school should be. Therefore, educationists argue, principals must be given broader powers in the management of their schools and the curriculum. But what will inform the "vision" of administrators who lack a solid grasp of academic subjects? In most cases, it will be the vacuous doctrines of the educationists.

Many of the guideposts suggested by effective schools research do not bode

The Perfect *Holiday Gift* Is Right In Your Hands.



Enjoy the holidays and cross a few names off your list today. Give a one-year membership to The Wilson Center Associates for a special Holiday Gift Rate as low as $16.

Every membership you give includes:

- Handsome gift card to announce your gift
- Membership identification card for your recipient
- Access to reports on Wilson Center conferences and seminars
- Discounts on Wilson Center books
- Savings on Smithsonian books, music, museum reproductions and gifts
- Full eligibility for Smithsonian study tours and regional events
- Plus—a full year of ***The Wilson Quarterly***, the unique newsmagazine of the world of ideas

Throughout the year, Wilson Quarterly delivers insights and observations ranging from fixing American universities to emerging pluralism in Brazil; from Nelson Mandela's legacy to a defense of the joys of materialism.

Please use one of the attached cards to order holiday gift memberships for all of your intellectually curious friends and relatives. Just $20 for the first subscription and $16 for each additional subscription or renewal order.

WQ

For Faster Service, Call 1-800-829-5108

well for the achievement of a clearer sense of direction at the top of the nation's schools. In 1990, for example, John E. Walker, now professor emeritus of educational administration and supervision at Arizona State University, presented a list of the "12 key skills every principal should possess," derived from a study of three principals by the NASSP: "problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance, oral communication, written communication, range of interest[s], personal motivation, and educational values."

Never mind that this careful research has produced a list of "skills" (some of which are not skills at all) required in virtually any profession. Examine instead Walker's description of the one singular attribute, "educational values":

> Aside from an excellent academic preparation, these three outstanding principals had life experiences that enabled them to work with and understand people. All were involved in sports; they knew what it took to succeed and the importance of hard work. They loved people, especially kids. All could be successful superintendents, but two out of three said they never wanted to lose contact with kids.
>
> These exemplary principals had a solid grasp of many disciplines, including essential elements of instruction, self-esteem programs, community education, public relations, retention, student testing, suicide prevention, stress management, and child growth and development. Other areas of expertise included parenting, homework, study skills, latchkey programs, and school-business partnerships.

One must remind oneself that Walker is describing the principals' *educational* values. Apparently, effective principals have on their minds everything but students' mastery of demanding academic subjects.

To the principal or superintendent fortified by such bizarre doctrines, the fact that he holds power and authority in the school proves that knowledge and academics really are not very important; it is important only to possess the credentials of formal education. After all, he is in a position of authority, despite what is probably a lowly academic record, and he rose to his position of high prestige and pay not because of his academic brilliance but because he fulfilled the requirements in education. The honest principal may recognize that many of the teachers under his authority are better educated than he is, but this may merely serve, in his mind, to validate his experience: if the teachers are so smart, why is *he* in charge of *them*?

Such attitudes have a demoralizing trickle-down effect. Even teachers who are fervently devoted to cultivating a love of the pursuit of knowledge in their students may think twice: if academic knowledge is so important, why is a less educated person earning more money, enjoying greater prestige and power, and serving as the school's standard-bearer? Thus ignorance becomes legitimized, the norm; the school's academic standards have been compromised and vitiated in the very position where they should be most sanctified.

It is very unlikely that, in setting standards and creating their vision of the school, administrators will reach the obvious conclusion: "The students need to be smarter than I am." After all, they are just kids, and it would be unfair to expect them to become as knowledgeable as a highly educated adult with a master's degree or doctorate. The principal may even think it reasonable if his charges achieve less than he did when he was in high school since, after all, he was enough of an academic success to become the head of his own school, and many students will not aim that high. It is a frightening thought: to

administrators it looks like success if graduating seniors are as well educated as they are!

In a 1987 survey, four years after publication of the landmark national report *A Nation at Risk*, only 46 percent of principals agreed with the proposition, "Schools require far too little academic work of students." The former principal who did not know the correct meaning of *vendetta* revealed his thoughts on academic standards by showing teachers a clip from *The Bells of St. Mary's*, in which Father O'Malley—no Jesuit, this padre—advises Sister Benedict to pass the failing Patsy, so her self-confidence (i.e. self-esteem) will not be harmed, standards being rather arbitrary anyway.

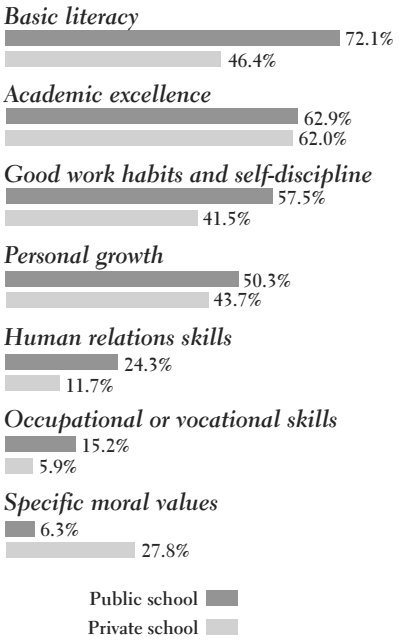
From an administrator's perspective, higher standards, even if they were needed, would have a variety of other drawbacks. They would increase the chances that more students would fail courses, making them ineligible under the "no pass, no play" laws for extracurricular activities, including, worst of all, sports. Besides the harm that failure might do to the students' "self-esteem" and the certainty of blistering phone calls from irate parents, the principal would also have to be aware of how a high failure rate would make the school appear. And the drop-out rate might rise. Overall, the principal would have to conclude, higher standards are a bad idea.

Unfortunately, there is no alternative to relying on principals and administrators for leadership. School boards have too many varied responsibilities, and members generally serve only part-time. Moreover, virtually all school boards are elected, so popularity with the voters is a more important qualification than academic achievement and wisdom. Can we turn to parents for leadership? While many are committed to getting the best education possible for their children, many more are not. In any event, parents are too removed from the schools' daily operations to play a very effective role.

Teachers can provide some leadership, but they hold the least power in the schools and not infrequently are, like the administrators, ardent educationists. This was vividly illustrated recently at my own school by a de facto straw poll on teachers' educational values. During our in-service training before the first day of school, we teachers were divided into groups of seven. Each group was given a large paper cutout of a student and some marking pens, with instructions to list on the cutout the characteristics we wanted our graduates to take along with them when they graduate from high school. After 30

Principal Goals

In a 1993–94 opinion survey, school principals were asked to rank their educational goals. The chart below shows the percentage who ranked each goal first, second, or third. More than one-third of the principals did not choose "academic excellence" as one of their top three goals.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993–94 (Principal Questionnaire).

minutes of brainstorming, the groups presented their results.

The first two groups listed high self-esteem, good grooming, job prospects, good ethical character, freedom from drugs and alcohol, politically active, socially conscious, and similar characteristics. It was not until the third group—mine—that a singularly academic characteristic made an appearance. It was not an outlandish wish: "the ability to read and write and do math at the 12th grade level." The fourth group continued in the vein of the first two, setting its sights on producing graduates who wear their pants at waist level and don't wind up in prison. To its credit, the fifth group included "has a common core of knowledge." The sixth and seventh groups resumed the undiluted stream of educationist psychobabble, adding to their list of objectives the hope that our graduates would be . . . happy! Nobody in the whole assembly seriously challenged the absurdity of suggesting such an elusive and personal condition as a goal of the schools.

An Unusual Period of Company *(1997), by Maysey Craddock*

After the last group finished its presentation, the school principal, our educational leader, commented that we had come up with an exceedingly large number of goals. We would need to concentrate on just a few, he suggested. *Which* few, however, was a subject he never addressed.

Our schools sorely need academic czars to crack the whip behind students to get them moving toward substantial academic goals. If we are to have authentic academic leadership in the schools, we must have principals and superintendents with solid academic backgrounds. A first step would be to require that all current principals and superintendents pass AP exams or their equivalents in English, calculus, a science, a non-native foreign language, and history. Administrators who did not pass these tests within five years would be sent back to the classroom to teach whatever subject they once taught. No matter how passionately and sincerely they might protest their love of education and learning, those who failed such tests would reveal that they do not love them enough.

We should also demand that future principals and superintendents have at least a master's degree in a traditional academic subject, not education or business. Virtually all principals surveyed by the NASSP held at least a master's degree, but only two percent of these degrees were in fields other than education.

Our schools need more education and knowledge, not more educationist tripe, with its emphasis on vague emotional, social, political, and psychological goals and its ugly tendency to rationalize and legitimize ignorance. Knowledge, not the mere shadow of knowledge, must be the guiding principle in our schools, and the standard for excellence in education must be set by intellectually accomplished principals and superintendents. Otherwise, we will be left with a choice between wringing our hands over the ignorance of our young people or contenting ourselves with their success at emulating their educational leaders.