The Parent Trap

by Tom Loveless

A new kind of revolution of rising expectations is sweeping the United States. It is a revolution fomented by reformers who believe that setting higher expectations in the schools is the key to improving academic performance. There is bipartisan political enthusiasm for the creation of tough new learning standards. Just about everyone wants to end social promotion, the practice of passing a student on to the next grade regardless of whether he or she has learned anything. Reformers poke, prod, cajole, and coax schools to embrace lofty academic expectations which, they believe, schools would not adopt on their own. They are confident that such heightened expectations will yield dramatic increases in student achievement.

In focusing on the schools, however, reformers are taking for granted one of the most powerful influences on the quality of American education: the American parent. They assume that parents will do whatever is necessary to raise children's levels of achievement. But will they? Do parents really consider classroom learning the most important aspect of their children's education? What are they willing to give up so that their children will learn more? Will family life change as academic achievement assumes a more prominent role in education? Will political support for reform remain firm if parents recoil from the everyday costs?

There are indications that many parents have trouble accepting the fact that improving education is not a pain-free exercise. In Virginia, when tough new statewide tests revealed earlier this year that only 6.5 percent of the schools met state standards, many parents (and others) responded with cries of anger and disbelief. Their anger was directed not at the schools but at the standards. There are other signs that parents' commitment to academic excellence is not very deep. A 1996 Gallup Poll asked: "Which one of the following would you prefer of an oldest child—that the child get A grades or that he or she make average grades and be active in extracurricular activities?" Only 33 percent of public school parents answered that they would prefer A grades, while 56 percent preferred average grades combined with extracurricular activities. (Among private school parents, the breakdown was almost the same, 34 percent to 55 percent.)

The importance of nonacademic activities in teenagers' lives is thoroughly documented in *Beyond the Classroom* (1996), a study of how American teens spend their out-of-school time, the portion of their weekly schedule that (in theory at least) parents directly control. Three nonacademic categories dominate, according to Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg: extracurricular activities, primarily sports, consuming 10 to 15 hours; part-time employment, 15 to 20 hours; and a host of social activities, including dating, going to the movies, partying, and just hanging out with friends, 20 to 25 hours. The national average for time spent on

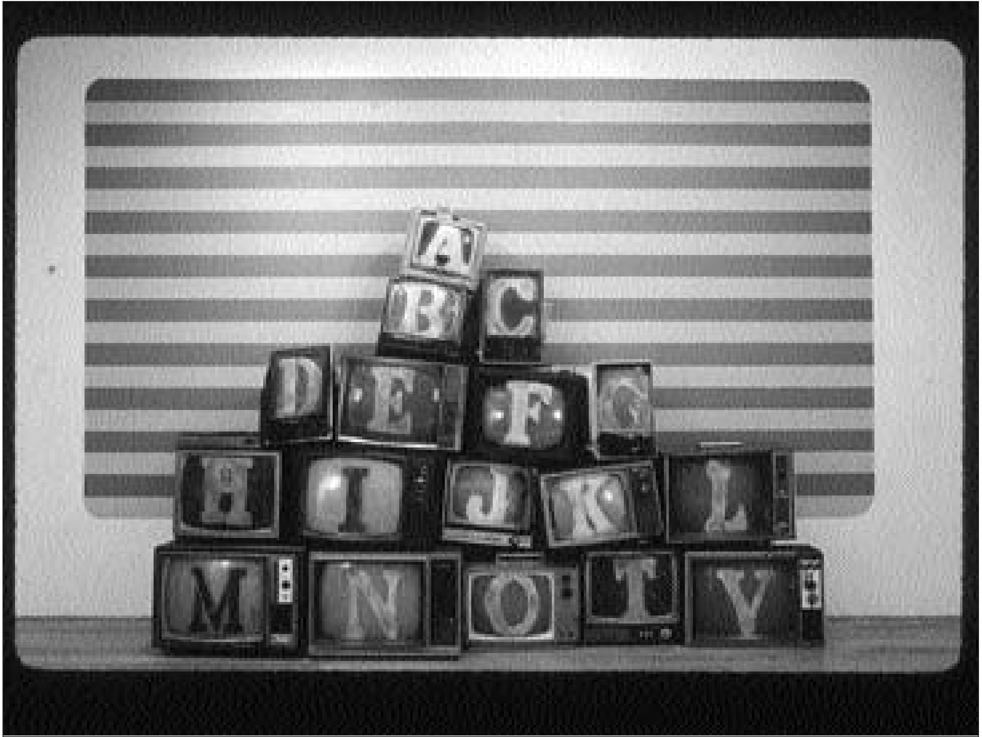
The Choice *(1998), by Marlene Baron Summers*

homework is four hours per week, not surprising given the few waking hours that remain after the whirlwind of nonacademic pursuits.

This distribution of teens' time represents a huge drag on academic learning. More than one-third of the teens with part-time jobs told Steinberg they take easier classes to keep up their grades. Nearly 40 percent of students who participate in school-sponsored activities, usually sports, reported that they are frequently too tired to study. More than one-third of students said they get through the school day by "goofing off with friends," and an equal number reported spending five or more hours a week "partying." And these self-reports probably underestimate the problem.

The big story here is that teenagers' time is structured around the pursuit of a "well-rounded" life. American families might value academic achievement, but not if it intrudes on the rituals of teen existence, especially part-time employment, sports, and a busy social calendar. This stands in stark contrast to the situation in other nations. In Europe and most Asian countries, it is assumed that the central purpose of childhood is to learn. Part-time employment of teenagers is rare, sports are noticeably subordinate to a student's academic responsibilities, and although there is plenty of socializing, it is usually in conjunction with studying or working with others on academic projects. The American student's four hours per week of homework is equal to what students in the rest of the industrialized world complete every day.

Significant cultural differences also appear in how parents judge their children's academic performance. A study by



The Building Blocks of Life *(1985), by John Fekner*

James Stigler of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, asked several hundred mothers from the United States, Japan, and China about the school performance of their fifth-grade children. More than 50 percent of the American mothers pronounced themselves very satisfied with their children's schoolwork, as opposed to only five percent of the Asian mothers. On tests measuring what these same children actually knew, however, the American students scored far below their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. When asked to explain their children's poor performance, the American mothers cited a lack of inborn ability. When the Japanese and Chinese children failed, their parents blamed the kids for not working hard enough.

American parents see academic achievement as a product of intrinsic ability rather than hard work, as just one of many attributes they want children to possess, and as something their own kids are accomplishing anyway. These beliefs, along with widespread peer pressure against academic excellence (who wants to be a "geek"?), an unrelenting strain of anti-intellectualism in American culture, and the weak academic demands of schools, combine to dampen the importance of academics for American youth and their parents.

We need not let educators off the hook, but parents bear some responsibility both for the lax standards in today's schools and for students' mediocre achievement. Parents appear more willing to embrace academic excellence in the abstract than to organize their family's daily life in order to achieve it. They enthu-

> Tom Loveless *is director of the Brown Center on Education Policy and a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is the author of* The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy *(1999).* *Copyright © 1999 by Tom Loveless.*

siastically support attempts to change schools in general but are ambivalent when it comes to schools they actually know.

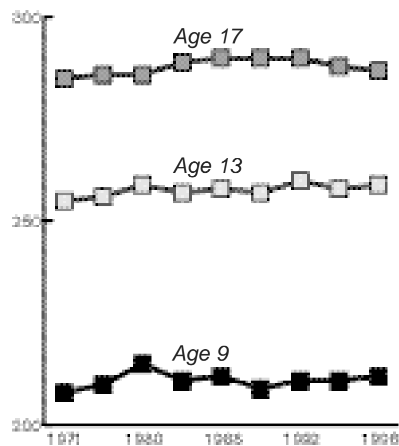
Polls show that parents believe their children's schools have higher standards and are of significantly better quality than the nation's schools in general. This phenomenon—the idea that "I'm OK, but you're not"—also shows up in surveys on health care (my doctor is great, but the nation's health care stinks), Congress (my representative is terrific, but Congress is terrible), and the status of the American family (mine is in fine shape, but families in general are going to hell in a hand basket).

Such complacency undermines meaningful school reform. Raising the level of achievement is hard work. Unless children can actually learn more math, science, literature, and history without breaking a sweat, then the prospects for reforms that ask children and parents for more—more time, more homework, more effort—are not very good. We don't hear much about what today's educational reforms may require of families. Indeed, when it comes to the subject of parents, the rhetoric seldom gets beyond calls for more "parent involvement" or for "empowering" parents. Reforms that grant parents control over where their children go to school, a favorite of the Right, or that offer parents a stake in governing local school affairs, a favorite of the Left, may prove to be valuable public policies for other reasons, but they have not yet convinced skeptics that they will significantly increase student achievement.

In Chicago, an experiment that involved creating parent-dominated school "site councils" to oversee individual schools produced a few renaissance stories, but also tales of schools engulfed in petty squabbling. As vouchers and charter schools become more widespread, will parents actually take advantage of the opportunities to improve the education of their children? Buried in the national comparisons of private and public schools is an interesting and relevant anomaly. Despite well-publicized research showing that private schools outperform public schools on achievement tests, more students transfer from private to public school than vice versa at the beginning of high school, precisely the time when one's academic accomplishments really start to matter in terms of college and employment. The desire to keep extracurricular activities close to home and to keep their children close to neighborhood kids appears to weigh heavily in parents' choices.

Another reason to doubt that empowered parents will wholeheartedly insist on higher achievement can be found in the history of American schooling. Schools have always attended to the convenience of parents, and, as a result, cultivating the

Reading Performance, 1971–96



The National Assessment of Educational Progress has tracked students' reading ability since the early 1970s. The chart shows a slight improvement among 9- and 13-year-olds through 1980, but virtually no change thereafter—and no significant change among 17-year-olds during the entire period. The maximum score is 500. There is only one bright spot (not shown): the gap between white and black students narrowed from 1971 to 1988. But then the improvements stalled, and among 13-year-olds the race gap widened.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 1999.

mind has simply occupied one place among many on a long list of purposes for the school. At the beginning of the 19th century, education came within the province of the family. Children learned reading at home, along with basic arithmetic and minimal geography, science, and history. Farming dictated the tempo of family life. Older students only attended school during the winter months, when their labor wasn't needed in the fields. At other times, even toddlers were sent to school, crowding classrooms with students from three to 20 years of age.

Later in the century, as fathers and mothers abandoned the farm for the factory and intermittently relocated in search of work, the modern public school began to evolve. One of its functions was custodial, providing a place for children to spend the day while busy parents earned a living. The magnitude of the change is staggering. As late as 1870, American students attended school only an average of 78 of 132 scheduled days; today's students spend more than 160 days in the classroom, and the modern school calendar runs to 180 days. More than 90 percent of school-age children now attend high school. At the beginning of the century, less than 10 percent did.

But the school's power is limited. Its monopoly over children's daylight hours never led to the recognition of intellectual activities as the most important pursuits of adolescents, either outside or inside school. Why do parents allow two-thirds of today's teenagers to work? After-school jobs are considered good for young people, teaching them a sense of responsibility and the value of a dollar. Most Americans think it's fine if teenagers spend 20 hours a week flipping hamburgers instead of studying calculus or the history of ancient Rome.

The development of young minds also finds competition in the school curriculum itself. For example, the federal government has funded vocational education since 1917. Americans have always expected schools to teach students the difference between right and wrong and the fundamental elements of citizenship. In the last three decades, schools have also taken on therapeutic tasks, spending untold time and resources on sex education, psychological counseling, drug and alcohol programs, diversity training, guidance on topics such as teen parenting, sexual harassment, and a host of other initiatives that have little to do with sharpening the intellect.

Some analysts maintain that parents don't support such diversions from academic learning, that these programs are nothing more than the faddish whims of professional educators. If so, parents have been awfully quiet about it. A more reasonable explanation is that, with parents busily working at two or more jobs, with many of these topics awkward for parents to discuss, and with parental authority showing its own signs of weakening throughout society, parents now look to schools to provide instruction that they once delivered themselves.

Schools are acting more like parents, and implementing real academic standards will probably force parents to act more like schools. They will need to stay informed about tests scores and closely monitor their children's progress. Parents of students who fall short of standards must be prepared for drastic changes in family life. Summers will be for summer school, afternoons and weekends for tutoring. This will cost money and impinge upon family time. Struggling high school students will be forced to spend less time on sports, to forgo part-time jobs, and to keep socializing to a minimum.

No one knows how parents will react to such changes. Higher standards are overwhelmingly supported in public opinion polls, but what will happen when they begin to pinch? In 1997, hundreds of parents in an affluent suburb of Detroit refused to let their children take a high school proficiency test, arguing that the nine-hour exam was too long and that it would unfairly label children who per-

The Fail-Proof Teaching Test

The Allies won World War II.

Really? I wasn't sure. Thank goodness the study guide I bought for the Indiana state teacher certification test included that important reminder in its social studies review. Other sections explained that it is incorrect to use "double negatives in standard written English," that "maps are drawings which [sic] show where places are in relation to each other" and that an $80 dress that is 20 percent off costs $64.

The actual test, which I took a few weeks ago, wasn't much more difficult. Sadly, my experience underscored a recent report by the Education Trust, a nonprofit organization in Washington, that found that teacher certification tests, which are required by 43 states and the District of Columbia, are far from challenging.

I should say that while the test I took was not rigorous, it was long. The test, which covered virtually every area of science, math, the arts and education theory, went from 8 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., save for two 25-minute breaks. From questions about the cold war to classroom discipline, the test required basic cognitive abilities, the fortitude to stay focused for eight-and-a-half straight hours and a No. 2 pencil—and not much more than that.

This test, like so much of what I am asked to do to prepare for a career as a secondary-school teacher, is not intellectually challenging, but is instead just plain tiring. It's as though anyone who can simply survive such a mind-numbing, serpentine process is ready to be a teacher.

Forget smarts; what it takes to become a state-certified teacher is not critical thinking, but eighth-grade skills and an ability to follow directions and rules that are often arbitrary.

Consider the education class I had on adolescent psychology. Each student had to give a presentation to the class. Though the content of my presentation was perfectly acceptable to the professor, I was marked off on my grade because I didn't give the class a handout sheet.

"But I didn't have anything I felt needed to be written up and handed out," I protested.

"That doesn't matter," the professor told me. "You always give the class a handout when you do a presentation."

I understand that it is difficult for states to determine who is qualified to teach. And I'm happy to be tested. But challenge me. Make me prove that I can reason and think and, in turn, teach students to reason and think. Give me essay questions about John Dewey or Jean-Jacques Rousseau rather than multiple-choice questions about the pitfalls of using an overhead projector.

The Education Trust also states that the scores necessary to pass teacher certification tests are laughably low: "Students would receive F's for producing such scores in the classroom, yet this is all states require of their teachers." Indeed, unlike on most standardized tests, you don't get an extra penalty for giving wrong answers on teacher certification tests. Thus, test-takers are encouraged to guess wildly on questions for which they do not know the answers.

Why are the tests so easy, I asked one of my education professors. "If they were any harder, not enough people would pass, and then we would have a shortage of teachers," he replied.

He said it with a laugh, but I fear that he's right. The number of school-age children is expected to rise substantially in the near future, and thousands of teachers—state-certified ones who know that the Allies won World War II—will be in demand.

—Kathleen Mills

Kathleen Mills is a graduate student in education at Indiana University. This essay first appeared in the New York Times *(July 19, 1999).*

After School *(1984), by Kathryn Freeman*

formed poorly. In Portland, Oregon, the school district invited the parents of 3,500 youngsters who had failed statewide proficiency exams to send the children to a summer school session set up at great expense and amid much hoopla; only 1,359 kids were enrolled. Every state has its share of stories. The elimination of social promotion presents the biggest test. Will the parents of children who are compelled to repeat, say, third or fourth grade, continue to support high standards? Or will they dedicate themselves to the defeat and removal of standards? In districts that see huge numbers of students facing mandatory summer school or failing to win promotion to the next grade, will parents push to water down tests and lower passing scores?

Some years ago, I came face to face with some of these implications when I taught sixth grade in a special program for exceptionally gifted, high-achieving youngsters, students approximately two years above grade level in all subjects. The curriculum was accelerated to the eighth- and ninth-grade levels, and I taught all academic subjects. Students applied for admission to the program, and my fellow teachers and I stressed that it wasn't for everyone. Parents seeking an education emphasizing creativity or the arts were advised to look elsewhere. An extremely bright student who hated doing homework would also have had a difficult time.

Getting to know the parents of my students was one of the most satisfying aspects of my job. They were actively involved in the school and indispensable in organizing field trips, raising money for computers, putting on plays, and doing anything else that enhanced their children's education. If ever a group supported lofty standards, this was it. But dealing with parents was

not all sweetness and light. Grading policies drew the most complaints. One upset parent threatened a lawsuit because I gave a zero to a student who cheated on a test. During a three-hour, late-night phone call, an angry mother repeatedly told me that I would suffer eternal damnation because her son had received grades disqualifying him for admission to an honors program.

Complaints were also voiced because I didn't accept late homework—"We had friends over last night and Johnny simply didn't have time to do his history," one father explained in a note—or because I wouldn't excuse absences for family ski trips or a student's "R&R day" of TV soap operas and game shows. And these complaints came despite the fact that enrollment in the program was by choice, the school's reputation for academic rigor well known, and the policies on these issues crystal clear.

Such conflicts go with the territory. Anyone who teaches—and sticks to the principles making the career a serious undertaking in the first place—will experience occasional problems with parents. The usual conflicts stem from the different yet overlapping roles that parents and teachers play in a child's life. Both are concerned with the same individual's welfare, but their roles are not interchangeable. Parents are infinitely more important to a child's upbringing, but the teacher is usually the most significant nonfamily adult presence in the child's life and, ideally, is more objective about the child's interactions with the larger world. Teachers pursue goals established by society rather than the family. They must be warm and understanding, but they must also make decisions serving the best interests of 30 or more people who have much to accomplish every day in the same small space.

The differentiation of parent and teacher roles, which strengthened schools and families in the 19th century, may be at the bottom of many parents' unrealistic perceptions of their children's school experiences. Just as reformers are probably right that the demand for high educational standards must come from outside the schools, the imposition of academic burdens on children probably must come from outside families.

There is some evidence that parents intuitively understand this. In a recent study by the Public Agenda Foundation that examined how parents view their role in education, parents said that the most significant contribution they can make is to send children to school who are respectful, hard working, and well behaved. They do not want a bigger say in how schools are run. Nor do they want to decide curricular content or methods of instruction. They trust educators who have earned their trust, and they want schools to do their job as schools so that parents can do their job as parents.

These seem like reasonable sentiments. But in the same study, parents also admit that they absolutely hate fighting kids to get them to do their homework. They gauge how things are going at school primarily by how happy their children seem and nearly 90 percent believe that as long as children try hard, they should never feel bad about themselves because of poor grades. These attitudes are potentially in conflict with more rigorous learning standards. If social promotion ends, many children will be held back in a grade despite their having tried hard. And these children will be unhappy. Other children will not get the acceptable grades they once did. A lot of people are going to be very unhappy.

Higher standards and the end of social promotion now enjoy tremendous popular support. But the true test will come when words become deeds. Until now, raising expectations in education has been portrayed as cost-free. It isn't. Schools and students and parents will bear the costs. If parents are not willing to do so, few of the ambitious changes American reformers are now so eagerly pursuing will make much difference.