

# Education Matters

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## CIVICS LESSONS A GIFT TO OUR STUDENTS



By Liam Julian

The *Washington Post*'s David Broder recently wrote a column trumpeting the value of teaching civics to American students. He interviewed Sandra Day O'Connor and former Colorado Governor Roy Romer (now serving as Superintendent of Los Angeles schools), both of whom are spokespersons for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS).

A trip to CMS's website reveals many applause-worthy sentiments—indeed, simply acknowledging the importance of civics education is commendable.

Yet both CMS and Broder's column make the same mistake that plagues many civic education initiatives. Instead of proposing that students learn civics through rigorous study of historical events, meaty biographies of important Americans, or lessons that integrate American history and politics with philosophy and character education, CMS offers a different

model. One that puts the cart before the horse.

CMS offers "six promising approaches to civic learning" of which "guided discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events" is one. What does this look like? The organization envisions teachers discussing "issues

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students find personally relevant... in a way that encourages multiple points of view."

The problems with this proposal are legion. It says that issues discussed be limited to those that "students find per-

sonally relevant." One wonders how relevant most 14-year-olds would find many international events, such as the recent countrywide protests in Nepal or Chinese President Hu Jintao's U.S. visit. A major objective of civics instruction should be to educate students and make international events and issues relevant in their lives.

It doesn't work the other way around.

Equally disturbing is the belief that any discussion must promote "multiple points of view." Conspicuously miss-

ing is any mention of facts. It's unwise to encourage young students to put forth multiple views before they secure a solid knowledge base. Civics education should not strive to create classes of opinionated high schoolers; it should first strive to

create classes of educated high schoolers. There is a significant difference.

Emotion and opinion are highly valued by CMS. Its members seem to believe that to be a productive citizen of a democratic society, students must constantly be active in “hands on” political activities—working on campaigns, running for student government (the Founders despised cafeteria food!), or protesting for or against this, that, and the other.

The message here—one that will assuredly do more harm than good—is that knowledge and learning come second to frenetic activity.

To wit: picking up a sign and protesting immigration law or the war in Iraq does not make one a good citizen. Protesting is easy these days (especially when it’s encouraged by authority figures). What’s difficult, what requires effort and commitment, is putting down the sign, going alone to the library, and hitting the books to understand the history and nuances behind the debate.

Civics education should encourage the latter pursuit. And if our schools do that well, the former will evolve as it should. ■



*Liam Julian is Associate Writer and Editor for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. He also writes extensively for the James Madison Institute, where he is an adjunct scholar.*

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# Why Hispanic Teens Drop Out of School

By Donna Garner

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I served as a Presidential appointee (appointed by President Reagan and then reappointed by President Bush) to the bipartisan National Commission on Migrant Education. Linda Chavez was our chairperson, and she guided our deliberations with great skill. Our Commission was one of the few in history that finished its report to Congress on time, came in underbudget, and dismissed itself on time rather than opting for the usual practice of extending its tenure ad nauseam.

I continued to be a classroom teacher and worked on Commission responsibilities before and after school as well as during the summers. At one point I volunteered to spend two summers traveling from one migrant center to the next so that I could gather firsthand information. I had grown tired of the “public hearing” scenario where we Commissioners heard mainly from the government/education/health/human services establishment. I wanted to interview “real” people (not special interest groups) who worked with “real” migrant children and their hard-working parents.

What I found out was that migrant parents (most of whom were Hispanic) badly wanted their children to learn English. I learned that in most bilingual education programs, very loving, caring people really wanted to help children. I also learned that even though most bilingual

classrooms started out in English, as the day wore on and the Spanish-speaking aides grew more tired with the stress of the classroom, they automatically lapsed back into their primary language, Spanish. The Spanish-speaking children did not transition into English because they became dependent upon the Spanish-speaking aides with whom they could easily communicate. Hence, no mastery of the English language occurred for most of our migrant children.

## Bilingual Pipe Dream

Then there were those authorities who said we should teach every child to be bilingual by teaching them Spanish and English. That idea sounded exciting to me because after all, the United States does share a common border with Mexico.

The blunt truth is, however, that the public schools have not done a very good job of teaching English. How would teachers have time to teach both languages adequately? I learned that it is a pipe dream to think that we English/Language Arts/Reading teachers would have time to teach equally well both English and Spanish. Because of time constraints and many other factors outside the teachers’ hands, one of the two languages would suffer; and since the acquisition of the English language is paramount to a person’s success in the United States, the issue seemed clear to me then and now: Children must

be taught English in English classes.

Besides, no group should expect the taxpayers to use their hard-earned money to maintain the traditions and customs of a particular ethnic, racial, or cultural group. If the Hispanics want to maintain their heritage (and certainly they should), they really need to do it through their churches, communities, organizations, etc. They should not expect the taxpayers to foot the bill. It is really not fair for the taxpayers to support one cultural group over the hundreds of other cultural groups. We are a nation connected by one language, and the public schools that are paid for by the taxpayers should support the acquisition of that language—English.

In a nutshell: Students should be taught English in English class. If schools wish to offer foreign language classes to students, then those classes need to be held

at another time during the school day. Young students can learn foreign languages readily particularly before the age of twelve; and if they learn them while they are young, many will learn to speak the language proficiently without an English accent. However, no time should be taken from English instruction for foreign language instruction.

For every minute that is taken from English instruction, the academic level will suffer. The slower a student is to master reading, writing, and the speaking of English, the more behind he will fall in his English acquisition. Soon he suffers the Matthew Principle in his English skills, “The rich get richer; the poor get poorer.” He falls further and further behind, as the other English-speaking students progress upward. I believe students taught in bilingual education classes sel-

dom arrive at the sophisticated reading level that is needed for the higher level secondary courses, and that is why we see such a huge dropout among Hispanic teens when they get to the high school years. ■



*Donna Garner is an AAE advisory member. She taught high school for over twenty-six years, and was appointed by Presidents Reagan and Bush to the National Commission of Migrant Education. She was also appointed to the Texas Essential*

*Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) writing team for English/Language Arts/Reading. For a list of classroom strategies that Donna uses, contact [wgarner1@hotmail.com](mailto:wgarner1@hotmail.com).*

## Protest 101

### Does student participation in immigration protests build character?

By Martin A. Davis, Jr.

From Los Angeles to D.C., and from Phoenix to Chicago, students are taking to the streets in numbers not seen since the 1960s, in this case to voice their opinions about immigration. Such public demonstrations are central to democracy, but are they central to education?

Schools in Montgomery County, Maryland—a tony suburb of D.C. with a Latino population just under 12 percent—say, “Yes.” The district decided that high school students could count their time demonstrating on the Mall in Washington toward the sixty hours of community service that Maryland demands of all students to graduate high school. The policy requires that students participating in marches do so outside of school hours. And because last month’s large protests fell during Montgomery County’s Spring Break, no class time was missed.

However, on the other coast, in tiny Tulare County, California, where the Latino population tops 50 percent, the district had different ideas. Students who left Dinuba High School to join protests in nearby Farmersville found that instead of receiving service hours, they received unexcused absences. Los Angeles Unified also worked hard to prevent its students from protesting off-campus by placing schools under literal lockdown. Some students climbed fences in order to take to the streets, and the district alerted their parents that disciplinary action would be taken.

It’s reasonable to believe that the students of Tulare County will take more from their experiences than will Montgomery



County’s youngsters. After all, the Golden State’s students put themselves on the line, knowing that their actions would result in punishment. Admittedly, an unexcused absence is a mild form of punishment. But it’s punishment nonetheless. It takes character to act when one knows that consequences are imminent. That’s the essence of the great civil disobedience movements.

ence movements.

Character is what Montgomery County hopes to instill in its students by requiring service hours. At the conclusion of each service activity, students must contemplate the “impact of his/her service on the community and his growth and feelings related to the service.” The program stems from the popular character education movement. While students should certainly be encouraged to stand up for their personal convictions, can such activity truly be considered service or character-building?

Character formation is vitally important, and schools have many opportunities to help shape it—through the study of history, requiring students to perform at high levels, and teaching them to take responsibility for their actions. And sometimes schools do it by saying no.

Dinuba High School arguably did more to teach its students character by not condoning their actions than Montgomery County did by rewarding kids for getting involved. Kudos to the district for sticking to the things it values (class time and formal education). And kudos to the students who took it upon themselves to learn that democracy comes at a price—sometimes small, oftentimes not. ■

*Martin Davis is Senior Writer and Editor for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. He served as adjunct professor of medieval history at the University of South Carolina, before becoming a journalist.*

# What's Not to Like?

The challenge and success of Zachary Rodriguez

By Jacqui James



As we ambled along the run-down but joyfully chaotic corridor of the Orca at Columbia School in Seattle, Washington, I asked Zachary Rodriguez, “So what do you like best about school?”

“What’s not to like about it? It’s number one!” he replied.

While that is not an unusual statement in itself, what is truly remarkable is that it took three tries, and a monumental amount of parental determination, to find the ideal school environment where Zachary might thrive.

Zachary’s father, Greg Rodriguez, knew that school would be challenging for Zach. Although his son is extremely bright, with an amazing memory, and demonstrates a ferocious desire to understand how things work, he also has sensory integration problems that can sometimes digress into behavioral problems when he gets frustrated or bored.

From kindergarten through second grade, Zach struggled as teachers did not yet understand his needs and he participated in purely special needs behavioral classes. He was sent home almost every

other day as unmanageable in the classroom, and his teachers had little hope that Zachary would get an education.

## A New Beginning

Things started to turn around after independent assessments demonstrated that he needed mainstream education with one-on-one support. Orca at Columbia was identified as the best match for Zach. The family was not overly optimistic because, yet again, the recommendation was for a behavioral class. However, Zach’s parents were impressed by the school’s ABC program; its principal, Ben Ostrom; and special ed teacher Judy Camann.

Mr. Rodriguez says, “Finding Judy has been a God-send. She understands Zach better than most anyone I’ve met.” Over the past year, she has become a strong advocate for Zachary’s needs.

“Zachary is a total success story with a big turn around in a short period of time,” explains Camann. He is now proficiently studying in the mainstream classroom at the third-grade level. He also has the benefit of slipping into the special ed room nearby to take a break from the demands,

seek a bit of quiet, or more likely, bubble over with enthusiasm to trained professionals who can cope with all his questions and still keep him on track. He is

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now more self-motivated. He asks many questions, but more importantly, listens to the answers. Camann elaborates, “He is a very creative problem-solver, a great storyteller, and popularly known as “Our Politician.” The key to understanding Zachary is accepting who he is and having high expectations. If you lower your expectations, he goes right down with them.”

## A Dedication to Children

Judy Camann has a twenty-year career working with children who have either innate challenges or challenges that life thrust upon them. Along the way, Camann has quietly garnered two general



Zachary Rodriguez and his teacher, Judy Camann.

educations degrees, special ed qualifications, reading qualifications, a master's degree in school counseling, has counseled in youth corrections facilities, and run Juvenile Youth Diversion programs. It is an impressive set of public service credentials but not enough to satisfy Judy Camann. "I am all about professional development," she says. "It is so easy to become stagnant in what you do."

She recently added the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Certification to her credentials. The NBPTS certificate challenges experienced teachers to assess their current teaching methods, write up their programs, and record classroom sessions that are then reviewed by teacher peers selected by the board. The motivation for going through such a process has more to do with examining one's own teaching practices and improving upon present techniques than monetary reward, although it does result in a wage increase in a number of states.

### The NBPTS

The NBPTS certificate is growing in popularity (in Washington only seventy-

one certified in 2000, but 900 certified in 2005—forty-four in special ed.) According to Terese Emry from the superintendent's office in Olympia, more and more teachers state wide are being encouraged to participate. The NBPTS certification process is being evaluated by Congress after recent studies questioned its efficacy. However, Camann feels that the NBPTS process has been more beneficial to her teaching than almost anything else.

Professionals who choose to work with our most complicated or troubled youths leave the rest of us grateful and relieved that they are willing to unravel the mysteries that so often shroud these students.

### The Power of Forgiveness

Judy Camann puts it into perspective, "The thing that keeps me doing a job like this, is seeing the kids come here every day, and it takes incredible courage and forgiveness on their part. It takes forgiveness for being seen by others as *the kid with the disability*. They forgive society, they forgive the norms of school. They forgive the boy who picked on them yesterday! They have to be able to forgive

others so they can walk back into that kickball game the next day and ask 'Can I play?'"

She finishes with this analogy. "It would be like putting me up into an airplane every day and expecting me to parachute out—given only a manual in Chinese and an instructor who speaks Greek."

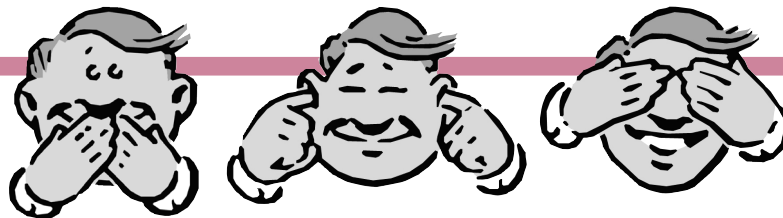
Zachary's story is heart warming, and it is refreshing to hear that the public schools are serving him well.

Everyone has dreams, some within their grasp and others that may seem like a stretch, but it is important to have them as they are a sign of confidence and optimism. The hopes for a boy like Zachary Rodriguez today are no different than any other boy his age. His father, Greg, is certain that he will be a highly functioning adult. With a twinkle in his eye, he adds, "I have no doubt that Zach will do something that will surprise us all!" ■

*Jacqui James is a photojournalist. Her work takes her around the world. She can be reached at [www.jacquijames.com](http://www.jacquijames.com).*

## Paid Not to Teach

Erick Huth, a Spanish high school teacher in the Nashville-Davidson School District, was out of class a total of forty-two and a half days this past school year, performing tasks on behalf of the local teachers union. Due to his high number of leave requests and complaints about his absences, district officials took a second look at Huth's excessive absences, only to find that they were perfectly legit according to the contract that they had signed. In the teachers' contract, members of the Metro Nashville Education Association are collectively granted 186 days of paid leave for union-related activities for



the 2005-2006 school year from which all union members can draw.

According to *The Tennessean*, "Huth leads the pack with forty-two and a half days, but six other veteran educators who play key roles in the union have been granted between ten and seventeen and a half days of paid leave this school year." The concern isn't just the amount of time Huth has been absent; according

to the district, it is because his absences are sporadic and consequently more disruptive to student learning. When questioned

about the absences, MNEA President Jame Merrit, who is on leave to serve her term, responded, "We didn't know we were being policed."

*"Teacher Time Off Raises Concern" Claudette Riley, The Tennessean, April 29, 2006*

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, an e-mail newsletter published by the National Council on Teacher Quality.

## Teacher Licensing and Effectiveness

### RESEARCH

Depending upon which news story you read, economist Dan Goldhaber has just come out with a study that shows teacher-licensing tests either do not matter a twit or they do, in fact, predict who will be an effective teacher. In a recent paper presented at the 2006 American Educational Research Association conference in which he looks at North Carolina's teachers, Goldhaber examines the usual teacher characteristics, but with access to how well teachers did on their licensing tests, enabling comparison of those scores with their student achievement gains over time. Consider this:

- Similar to recent findings by Eric Hanushek, the great ma-

majority of variation in teacher test scores is due to variation within schools and not between schools. This is an emerging consensus finding from research and one that should be considered in the context of paying great teachers more to work in high poverty schools. They may already be there.

**"The great majority of variation in teacher test scores is due to variation within schools and not between schools."**



- Teachers with the highest test scores are more likely to be teaching middle-class white children than poor or minorities.
- Some licensing tests—though all were Praxis or NTE tests—correlate with teacher effectiveness; others do not.

- Licensing tests clearly correlate with teacher effectiveness; it's a question of degree, though. The higher a teacher scores, the better the teachers' students perform. However, Goldhaber tries to control for the fact that high-scoring teachers tend to teach in high-performing schools, and the strong correlation that he had observed becomes considerably weaker. In the final analysis, Goldhaber terms teacher licensure a "weak signal of teacher quality."

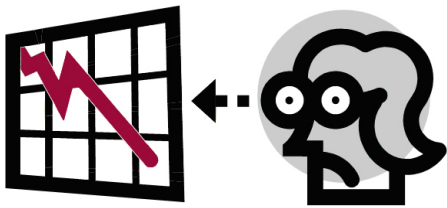
### Other findings:

- Like many others before him, Goldhaber finds no correlation between having a master's degree and student achievement. He found some evidence that having a Ph.D. characterizes a less effective teacher than one who just has a bachelor's degree.

- There's no evidence that experience matters after five years in the classroom. Like a lot of other research, he finds that teachers are pretty effective after only one or two years in the classroom.
- Consistent with Thomas Dee's research, matching student and teacher race for black students might help, though the numbers aren't especially telling in that direction. High-performing black teachers, however, did produce better gains in black students than similarly performing white teachers with black students.

*Findings from "Everyone's Doing It, but What Does Teacher Testing Tell Us about Teacher Effectiveness?" by Dan Goldhaber, April 2006*

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, an e-mail newsletter published by the National Council on Teacher Quality.



## Competing to be at the Bottom

While thumbing through a March 2006 report from the Colorado-based Independence Institute titled, "Counting the Cash for K-12: The Facts about Per-Pupil Spending in Colorado," Education Intelligence Agency came across a graphic that illustrates why it pays to be skeptical.

The institute found that "at least ten states claimed in 2004 or 2005 to rank forty-ninth in education funding." The list includes Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Utah.

When it comes to funding, everyone claims to be below average.

Source—Education Intelligence Agency's Communiqué



Teacher: Why are you late?

Sam: Because of the sign.

Teacher: What sign?

Sam: The one that says, "School Ahead, Go Slow."

Teacher: John, how do you spell "crocodile"?

John: K-R-O-K-O-D-A-I-L

Teacher: No, that's wrong.

John: Maybe, but you asked me how I spelled it.

Teacher: What is the chemical formula for water?

Sarah: H I J K L M N O

Teacher: What are you talking about?

Sarah: Yesterday, you said it was H to O!



## Games and Workshops

**Risky Business** (board game) is discounted 30 percent for In The Classroom Media (ITCM) teachers. This popular, fun, easy-to-learn game provides a realistic fast-paced experience that teaches about the formation and management of new businesses. Teacher's guide included.

**The Foundation for Teaching Economics** (workshops) is offering teachers a \$150 stipend for select workshops. FTE provides a variety of high quality professional development opportunities for high school social studies teachers.

**The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible**, a Free-Market Odyssey book is discount-

ed 28 percent for ITCM teachers. This book is a series of thirty-nine short story adventures that explain the philosophy of liberty in an effective and entertaining way.

**Working for Good** (curriculum and more!) is offering teachers a free online curriculum and series of video conferences. The curriculum provides an unusual and interesting perspective on how to integrate entrepreneurship and business with doing good. For more information, visit <http://www.workingforgood.com>

Source—In The Classroom Media provides educational products for teachers and students. Website: [www.intheclassroom.org](http://www.intheclassroom.org).



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## Watchdogs or Lapdogs? Researchers lack objectivity to ferret out bias

By J. E. Stone

If there is anything for which public education is well known, it is the recurrent adoption of untested policies, programs, and practices called fads. The pattern is so well known that experienced teachers joke about it.

Two universities have come together in an attempt to ferret out bias in education research and help policy makers make better policy. Arizona State's Education Policy Studies Laboratory and the University of Colorado's Education and the Public Interest Center have established the Think Tank Review Project.

Forget for the moment that the Think Tank Review Project is funded by the National Education Association.

Policymakers should consider the track records of these two organizations

in alerting the public to the existence of costly and ineffective programs in publicly funded education.

Policymakers, who are trying to judge the credibility of the university-based organizations versus the private think tanks, would be well served to ask these questions:

- Has the organization questioned the merits of any of the unsuccessful education reforms of the last thirty years or so, particularly before the money to support the reform ran out?
- Has it endorsed, disseminated, or led any of these unsuccessful reforms?
- Has it provided any public reports of the human and financial costs of these policy failures, or taken steps to help

policy makers (and themselves) avoid making the same mistakes in the future?

- Does the organization aim to equally serve the interests of both buyers and sellers? In other words, would this organization have the public believe that they are equally faithful to the education community's interest in conveying a positive view of itself and the public's interest in knowing the unvarnished facts?

Now if there is any observable trait that differentiates the two university-based think tanks from the private ones they intend to examine for bias, it is that the private ones have done a remarkable job of identifying fads and alerting policymakers, while the university-based ones, such as the sponsors of this project, appear to have been guided by a policy of "see no evil."

Plainly, buyers and purveyors of educational policy and practice have competing objectives, and organizations that attempt to serve both face an inevitable conflict of interest. It is precisely a situation of this sort that resulted in fraud at Merrill Lynch and the downfall of ENRON.

Education's consumers need watchdogs that bark, and the Think Tank Review Project is nothing more than an attempt to muzzle them. ■



*Dr. J.E. Stone is an educational psychologist and a professor in the College of Education at East Tennessee State University. He also heads the Education Consumers Clearinghouse ([www.education-consumers.com](http://www.education-consumers.com)), 1655*

*North Fort Meyer Dr., Suite 700, Arlington, VA 22209. Telephone: 703-248-2611; E-mail: [professor@education-consumers.com](mailto:professor@education-consumers.com).*