

May, 2006

*"It's only free
speech when
you use it."*

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The President's View

by Don McKell

Every now and then, someone temporarily mistakes me for an expert on the subject of education. It might be a school board member, a superintendent, a newspaper person, or a community member. I am asked for my opinion about what could improve schools, or why this school (or district) is better than that one, or what makes a good teacher.

As if I know.

I started getting paid to teach high school over thirty-five years ago in 1970. Except for my first year at 60%, I taught mathematics and some computer science full time up until 1997, when I slid into my current job following the resignation of my predecessor. I was a pretty good math teacher. I joined a couple of professional organizations, and even helped to found one. Like every other teacher, I attended countless staff development offerings, conferences, and conventions.

Since becoming the president of ESTA, I haven't had (and haven't made) a lot of opportunities to study up on educational philosophy or school evaluative techniques or comparative teaching methods. Those things aren't in our contract. They never have been there, and they probably never will be. And much of the ESTA President's job is to monitor compliance with that document, working to extend and preserve the rights of our members, and leaving the science of education to the practitioners.

If you read our contract from front to back, you will find not a single line that says teachers get to select their own textbooks. Nor will you find language stating that teachers have control over the content of the curriculum they teach. Within the confines of the contract, we do not choose our students nor set the criteria for their graduation, or even have much of a say in the size of our supplies and instructional materials budgets.

Non-expert that I am, I can't help but think that somewhere in the list of things over which teachers have no contractual control, there are probably some matters that could influence the quality of the job we do as educators.

Maybe right at the top of that list would be some sort of agreement about the *purpose* of high school in the first place. In the opinion of many, the whole function of high school (at least in the most recent political iteration) is to get students to pass the CAHSEE. Beyond that, the second most important purpose of the four years these kids spend with us is to get good numbers in their STAR tests and our API and our AYP. Closely following that, the next highest ranking purpose of high school seems to be the preparation of our students for their next school. And even though not many will dare speak the words, it is common knowledge that the *real* reason for high school is to enable students to get a Good Job so they can buy lots of Things.

I'm not convinced much of that is true. My own personal philosophy regarding the ultimate purpose of high school is that it ought to prepare the next generation of our citizens to participate in making the decisions that will steer our nation in its next fifty years. Prepare them to be able to recognize spin, and hype, and lies, and truth, and beauty. Prepare them to stay healthy, and to vote intelligently so that there will be an infusion of quality into the longer lives they will lead, and so they will leave the world better than they found it.

If that *is* the reason for high schools, I think we're not doing too well.

Suppose – just for fun – that six months from now, the federal government and the state legislature and our school board started seeing things from this very perspective. What would change? How would we work towards that goal, or whatever other goal might be chosen?

I know that a shortage of money has always provided impediments to bringing about the changes we think we'd like to make. Despite *irrefutable proof* that class sizes of 15 to 17 work better than big ones, we don't have small class sizes, because we can't afford them with the current level of state and federal funding. (Correction: we probably *could* have much smaller class sizes if our schools had 12 period days and teachers worked for half of what we currently earn.)

What if the money suddenly doubled? Or tripled? If *you* were in a position to make the decisions, what would *you* spend it on to improve the quality of East Side schools? Increase teacher pay? Sure, but how does that directly improve schools? Reduce class sizes? Sure, but where do you find all those new teachers? Better teacher training and staff development? OK, but we're all still looking for that elusive consul-

tant with the perfect in-service program. More choices for students as to their scholastic track? Maybe. But are 13-year-olds really ready to make decisions that will set the course for the rest of their lives? (Come to think about it: are 60-year olds any better at making these decisions for them?) Greater involvement of parents and the community in making sure schools are getting the job done? Sure, but how do we compete with television, video games, other mindless and demeaning entertainment, and chemistry in the six hours per day we have our students?

All of us are experts, and none of us is an expert, when the questions get this deep.

Someone has called for an Academic Achievement Summit meeting this coming Saturday to examine ways of closing the Achievement Gap in our school district. Superintendent Bob Nuñez has presumably invited a whole bunch of experts to come to that meeting and share their wisdom. He also invited me, probably because I'm the ESTA President and I know so much. Right.

I believe that there is ample evidence that some students in this district do not get as much out of their four-year experience with us as others do. I further believe it might even be true that less successful students are more concentrated at some schools than others. But I don't know why that should be, and I'm sure no better than the next person when it comes to figuring out what to do about it, especially if whatever changes are proposed need to be implemented on the cheap.

PANORAMA
MARTIN BRANDT, IHS
EDITOR

Panorama is a monthly publication of the East Side Teachers' Association, 888 S. Capitol Ave. San Jose, CA.

Panorama is a forum for ESTA members, and welcomes all member contributions. Submissions must include author's name, position, and school site. Those with fewer than 250 words will be printed in the "Letters" section. All submissions may be edited for length or clarity.

Letters, articles, columns, queries, or classified ads (for ESTA members only) should be emailed as Microsoft Word Attachments to brandtm@esuhsd.org. Deadline for May submissions is Friday, April 28, 2006.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in *Panorama* are those of individual members and may not represent the official views of the East Side Teachers Association. *Panorama* will not print ad hominem attacks, personal insults, or racially provocative imagery.

HHH 1910-1993

Postmarks

Evergreen Valley High School

In preparing this statement of my candidacy for ESTA Vice President, I was asked to write about my “experiences, integrity, (and) my ability to handle pressure from administrators.” As the only member of the bargaining team who’s under forty--once I was the only member under fifty--let me share with you a little bit about me and what I have been doing for the past nineteen years--twelve in the classroom.

As a Mexican American, I would like to see more minorities involved in the union. I am a graduate of Independence High School, class of 1987. I went to San Jose State. I did my student teaching at LeyVa Middle School and I was offered a job with my emergency credential before I finished my credential.

Although I’m young, I’ve always been active. At LeyVa Middle School, I became good friends with Rich Clavarie and Bert Renteria. They mentored me about what it means to be part of a union. They suggested I become an assembly representative for LeyVa, and I began attending ETA(Evergreen Teachers Association) assembly meetings.

Even as early as my second year of teaching, I was unafraid to stand up to administration. That year, we started school without a contract. LeyVa teachers decided not to go into our classroom during back to school night. Being a probationary 2, people told me I might not want to participate, but I did. The following week, ETA signed a new contract and the LeyVa staff felt that we helped that decision along.

Three years later, we again started school without a contract, and ETA formed a strategy committee which I co-led with Sylvia Alvarez. We wore black on Thursdays, passed out signs to parents, did not work outside of our contractual day, and we had news coverage at a board meeting--which lead to the signing of our new contract that school year in March.

After 6 years of teaching junior high, I applied to East Side. I was offered a temporary contract, but

negotiated a probationary contract, and I went to teach at Silver Creek, which LeyVa students feed into. It was a great experience being reunited with my past students.

When I came over to teach at Evergreen Valley High School, I volunteered to be the temporary building President. Since then I have been elected four times. I am also the grievance representative and I have dealt with many issues and concerns that were mostly settled before they become a level one grievance. I search out the people who I know can help me resolve the issues, but I have had to file grievances when the issue could not be resolved without the district’s help.

I have attended Executive Board meetings, assembly meetings, the NEA, bargaining meetings, and grievance training. I have gone to the UCLA, CTA institute two times and plan to go again this year. I have also attended the Minority Leadership Training and I attend the Hispanic Caucus every year.

I am the advisor for the Evergreen High School-Christian Club, for which I had to get approval since the district policy, dated 1972, forbade such clubs on any campus in the district. This rule has now been updated after a conversation I had with Bill Kugler three years ago.

In this way, I will continue to build relationships with the East Side cabinet, and I feel this will benefit ESTA. I am willing and able to take on the responsibilities of Vice President. I have the energy and dedication needed to hold this position.

--MARISA VERA

*Deadline for submissions to the
June issue of Panorama is
Friday, May 26, 2006*

In Defense of the CAHSEE

by Todd Seal

Respond at <http://www.toddseal.com/rodin/>

The CAHSEE, the best thing to happen to the public education system in a long time, is not flawless; it's a gigantic step in the right direction, though. If we could use the CAHSEE to replace silly, meaningless exams, like the battery of tests that fall under the STAR designation, and encourage colleges to consider CAHSEE scores when weeding through applicants, we'd have a test that students would really care about doing well on.

But the reserve of loopholes has not run dry simply because we now have an exit exam. Both students and schools are figuring ways to bypass the CAHSEE as a requirement.

The Students

You study hard in your classes and earn passing grades. You stay on task during your school day, dutifully complete the work waiting at home, stay out of trouble, and attend school as often as your health permits. The remaining hurdle, a test that assesses your ability to show mastery of several 8th grade and many 10th grade state standards in English and mathematics, wavers in the distance, flapping in the wind of your graduation gown. Will you try everything within your power to pass this test?

Of course not! You'll sue! And many adults will back you up.

What Took You So Long?

According to an Associated Press article on SFGate.com, The San Francisco Chronicle's online publication, a group of students and parents filed a lawsuit in February against the state "claiming the California high school exit exam is illegal and discriminatory" (<http://tinyurl.com/fdrd6>).

We've known about this test as a graduation requirement for the class of 2006 since 2004; the legislation for the test passed in 1999. If real problems with the test exist, why did people wait until the last minute to bring these issues up and into court? Is it because the litigants' kids are finally up against the fence and have to face the fact that they've squandered their 12 years of free public education? Or is it some other reason?

No Opportunity Means A Problem With Schools, Not The Test

The lead attorney for the case, Arturo Gonzales, makes an interesting but questionable point: "many students in California have not been given a fair opportunity to

Blogma, continued

learn the material on the exam.”

This should only be true for special education students. All other students should be held accountable to the state standards the CAHSEE purports to test. The AP article suggests that Gonzales’s lawsuit is not filed on behalf of special education students. Rather, it seems that Gonzales is in charge of a lawsuit full of mainstream students and their parents, though he may be representing some English Language Learner (ELL) students as well.

For mainstream students, Gonzales’s statement is a horrible thought, one that indicates bad teachers and bad schools. Mainstream students who are not exposed to instruction based on the state standards are products of teachers and schools who are not doing their jobs. But I have no idea how Gonzales could possibly prove this to be true. Nor do I know how he has the gall to come out and say something that I believe would legally be defined as slander, though I’m not certain since I’m no lawyer.

For special education students, Gonzales’s claim is more acceptable, though certainly should not be made as a blanket statement since all IEPs are different. Who is to say that all special education students do not have access to those standards? It isn’t by default that special education students are liberated from the same standards everyone else receives instruction in. Maybe they have spectacular teachers and parents who are able to cover those standards in a way accessible to the student.

But let’s pretend that Gonzales is correct, that equal access to standards-based instruction does not exist in the state of California. Does that point out a problem with the exam or with schools?

If there’s a problem with the CAHSEE, an exam is one thing and is easily modified. If there’s a problem with schools, however, that’s a systemic issue suggesting a broken system. That affects 100% of the population, much larger than a single exam whose flaw only impacts a certain percentage of students. If what Gonzales is saying is correct and it actually can be proven, then that’s as loud a call for complete school reform as I’ve ever heard.

Sadly, instead of using this idea to usher in systematic change, the idea is used to attack a test. Even more sadly, the test attacked is one of the only tests that requires students to take some responsibility for their own education. Instead of seeing the fact that not all students are given access to the standards as a flashing red light on the public education dashboard, instead of

working to fix the system, the flaw is used to get kids out of taking a test.

Once those students are freed from the obligations of the test, silence falls over the crowd. No change; no improvement; nothing any better than it was before.

It’s Settled, Then

Jack O’Connell has “settled” the special education debate by postponing the CAHSEE requirement for special education students graduating in June 2006 (<http://tinyurl.com/reujg>). All bets are off come the 2006-2007 year and O’Connell has stated that there are no alternatives to the CAHSEE, the implication being that special education students will be forced to take and pass the CAHSEE in order to graduate. But anyone want to take wagers as to whether or not that demand is rescinded next year, as well?

How can the public education system maintain any credibility when requirements are stated as solid, only to melt away at the first challenge? The fact that requirements are put in place without considering things like special education students who are not instructed in all the state standards, who are not given a chance to learn all of the items the CAHSEE expects a student to know, shows a lack of planning, yet another reason to question the public education system.

If high school diplomas are to be significant, not everyone can earn one.

Now, I will admit that there seems to be something fishy with the lack of an alternative to a standardized test. My understanding is that the legislation mandating the CAHSEE states that there be an alternative made available to those who choose to pass this requirement another way than the traditional test. Go ahead and sue on those grounds; I’m happy to support such a case since the state should have been working on that alternative this entire time.

But to sue on the grounds that the material hasn’t been covered in class is ridiculous. If a child is in a class that doesn’t teach him or her what’s needed to pass the CAHSEE, the parent shares blame for not complaining to the school, withdrawing the student from the class, transferring from the school, or requiring the child to attend after school study sessions for the test. At some point, a child must take accountability for his or her learning (or lack thereof). You can lead a horse to water...

In the spring of 1984, professor George Grant of the San Jose State English department decided that in lieu of the usual hours glossing the *Pelican Shakespeare* in some nondescript Sweeney Hall classroom, he would lead his undergraduate Shakespeare class on a summer bicycle tour through England, in search of Shakespeare plays.

In the fashion of those times, he used scissors and glue to cut and paste some pictures of the Bard and some bicycles onto a sheet of construction paper; then he “Xeroxed” the master and plastered several dozen of his adverts around the San Jose State Campus. “The Bard and the Bicycle,” the placard read.

His ad campaign succeeded in attracting precisely four students out of 25,000. One of them, fatefully, was me.

Professor Grant was not in the least disheartened by the small turnout, but proceeded with his plan. He made ticket reservations (pre-internet, mind you!) for productions in Stratford and London, and devised an itinerary that would lead us through Oxford, Cambridge, and Stratford on Avon. So in June, I crammed my Schwinn Super le Tour into a large bicycle box procured from Desimone’s Bicycle Shop on Second Street, filled a brace of panniers with tent, clothes, sleeping bag, stove, and two Hohner Marine Band harmonicas, and boarded a British Airways charter to Gatwick.

When we arrived, we assembled our bicycles and gear and pedaled off, reminding ourselves constantly to ride with the traffic--now on the *left* side of the road. Let’s see: we saw a student production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in Oxford, and I got my first taste of the inescapable *Twelfth Night* in Cambridge. In Stratford on Avon, I saw the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *Richard III*, for which part Antony Sher justly attained national fame. You can still see his picture in the *Richard III* blurb in various guides to English Literature.

Even in the dim workings of my late-adolescent mind--my fondest G-rated hope for the trip was to walk across Abbey Road-- I understood that I was in the presence of greatness with that production. But it would be safe to say that I understood only about thirty percent of it. It saddens me to think that I took up the seat of some more worthy Bardophile, but hey, what are you gonna do?

We made it to London in time for a production of *Julius Caesar*. Good, but not born of the same sublime inspiration as the Stratford show. Same with

Measure for Measure. Interestingly though, both productions featured an actor named Daniel Massey, who played Caesar one night and the Duke in *Measure for Measure* the next. I was impressed.

One of our last nights in London, we had tickets for the Royal Shakespeare Company again, only this time for a play called *The Time of Your Life*, by a California writer named William Saroyan.

Now I knew who Saroyan was, somewhat. When I was a boy, my dad had read to us Saroyan’s books *My Name is Aram* and *The Human Comedy*. So I knew he was an Armenian American from Fresno who wrote gentle, humorous and unapologetically sentimental tales of what he called “the ugly little city containing the large comic world.”

I’m not sure how many people out there can look at a single moment or event and say, “There. That’s it. That’s the moment my life changed. That’s what helped define me.” But for me, that play was it. Somehow, in some lovely irony, I had travelled across a continent and an ocean to rediscover the work of a writer from a town about 150 miles from my home.

There was Daniel Massey *again*, this time playing the part of Joe, a friendly San Francisco waterfront drunk whose one goal in life is to be good to others. Two nights before he was Julius Caesar, but to listen to him now, you’d have thought he was American.

After two and a half hours in that theater, I was ruined for life. I didn’t walk out knowing what I wanted to be in life, but I sure as hell knew what I *didn’t* want to be: “an important heel,” as one character scornfully puts it.

“Living is an art,” says Massey’s Joe at one point. “It’s not bookkeeping. It takes a lot of rehearsal for a man to get to be himself.” That was it. It was OK to be lost in the world, in fact preferable to any number of alternatives.

I suppose this is the part where I advocate the return of Saroyan’s work to the American classroom. But that would be such a disservice. Saroyan deserves so much more than to be crammed into another godawful ten-pound anthology with predetermined “lessons.” So does Shakespeare, for that matter. And Euclid, and Lincoln, and Newton.

Books are wonderful things, but George Grant, professor of English at San Jose State, was not content to show me the book. He showed me a small part of the world, and when class ended, I wanted to see more of that world, and know it, and love it.

By
Martin Brandt
IHS

ESTA Classifieds

FOR SALE: Beautiful (NEW) timeshare at the Westin Ka'anapali, on Maui. Two-bedroom lock off, island view. Excellent investment! Has appreciated 40% in two years!! Two kitchens, two bathrooms, all housekeeping supplies, sleeps 8, pools, waterslides, kids' club, on the beach, grocery delivery, etc. Use the one bedroom one year, then use the studio the next or use the whole unit every other year (floating week); you can even stay for two weeks!! Current selling price: 32-37K -- we're selling ours for only 25K. Website: www.westinkanapali.com. Please call Pat at 532-1332 or email phboyd@pacbell.net.

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FOR SALE: Oak Teacher's Desk-- 54" x 33"-- six drawers, with chair \$300.00 Call 74287 or 378-9593 Marta Kinder (AH)

Maui 1 bedroom and 2 bedroom condos available July 3-17. 1 bedroom \$750 a week and 2 bedroom \$950 a week. Call Gary Miller at Yerba Buena or cell number 408-892-1873.

For sale: Nice Dark Wood Dining Room Table. Four-leg style, 43" round, 60" when built-in leaf is extended. Four matching, upholstered chairs. Heavy and well-made, legs removable for easy transportation--but bolted on with BIG bolts, so not flimsy at all. Great for second table or small area. Well worth the \$250.00 asking O.B.O. Contact Catherine Baron at Mr. Pleasant HS or email catherinebaron@sbcglobal.net.

Joe Sousa, handy service: Remodeling, repair, plumbing, electrical, flooring and tile, drywall. Free estimates. Excellent references. License number 316835. Tel. (408) 234-7428. (Marie Anderson, AH).

Intero Real Estate Services are doing great things for ESUHSD members and friends AND they are bringing in two experienced real estate professionals and home stagers. Sam Alvarado and Sheryl Ruth are wives of teachers (Don Alvarado at IHS and Leo Ruth at Bellarmine). Together they understand the importance of funding education, and are offering (from their proceeds) a \$1000.00 donation to be made in your name to the school, program, team, or department of your choice. Please call (408) 772-7661 Sam or (408) 348-5449 Sheryl.

The Backside

Lies, damned lies, and statistics

Boys fight in defense of moms' honor

Two boys sustained extensive facial injuries during a violent lunchtime clash at a local high school yesterday, each fighting to defend the honor of his mother.

Witnesses say the altercation began when one boy looked at another. "I don't know who looked first, but you can't be doin' stuff like that," said one observer. "So one of 'em, he said something about the other one's mom, and the other one is all, 'Yo mama,' and that's when they started to throw down."

An enthusiastic crowd soon surrounded the two combatants, who proceeded to pummel each other with a series of deftly executed haymaker punches.

Spectators agree that the blood-letting was one of the most delightful events of the school year. "Violence is so much better when it's done for a noble cause, like defending your mother's good name," noted one sophomore, who had rushed to the scene to enjoy the boys' humiliation.

The two boys were unavailable for comment, as doctors were still busy reconstructing their jaws with wire. But the boys' mothers, interviewed while waiting for their sons in the emergency room lobby at a nearby hospital, spoke proudly of their sons' achievements.

"I could ask for no greater Mothers Day present than the sense of pride I

now feel," said one, "knowing that my sweet baby sacrificed his good looks to defend my honor before a crowd of relative strangers."

The other mother agreed. "I'm going to take my son out to dinner tonight and feed him a pureéd steak through a straw."

Her pride was enhanced by her son's emerging maturity. "My boy used to fight over nothing, but now he's fighting to preserve my reputation. It's nice to see how much he has grown in his six years in high school."

Fire alarm signals actual fire

A massive firestorm tore through a local high school yesterday, killing thousands and destroying the campus, but triggering the fire alarms authentically for the first time.

Investigators said the fire was caused by an incendiary combination of fumes, cigarettes, and hairspray in the girls' bathrooms.

"We are absolutely delighted with the results of the fire," said one school official. "The alarms worked just as they were supposed to."

Students agreed. "I lost all my friends," said one. "But the fire alarm itself was just great. Maybe I'll listen to it next time, when there's a real fire."

One teacher described a very relaxed scene. "My students just sat there like a bunch of slugs, as if the alarm meant nothing to them. I have no idea why," he added.

Fire fighters were slow to respond to the scene of the catastrophe, in part because they thought it was just another in a long series of false alarms. "Yeah, we saw the smoke," said one. "But we just figured it was some punk kids smoking out at the handball courts."

Administrators were delighted with the performance of the alarm system. "Now we know for sure that our school is a safe place," said one. "All we need now is to build a new school and find some students somewhere."

New dress code forbids Coke gear

Officials at Pepsi Cola Corporation are praising a recent decision by the East Side Union High School District to amend the dress code so that no promotional gear from Coca Cola or any other competitor of Pepsi shall be allowed on its campuses.

In a statement released yesterday, the district explained that allowing such promotional material on its campuses caused "a grave conflict of interest with our mission to assist Pepsi Co. in establishing lifelong product loyalty to Pepsi among East Side students."

Many students found out the hard way about the new dress code. Junior Diana Thurst was sent home when school authorities noticed she was wearing a "GOT MILK?" t-shirt.

"While milk's calcium content may indeed strengthen bones and help prevent future problems like osteoporosis, it is nevertheless a *de facto* competitor against Pepsi," one advisor explained. "Students should not encourage one another to drink milk if it deprives Pepsi Co. the chance to make a profit."

Fans of Mexican soccer clubs America and Chivas--which are sponsored by Coca Cola--found themselves tapped on the shoulder when they appeared at school in team jerseys. "We had to turn our jerseys inside out, while fans of Cruz Azul stood there laughing," said one fan indignantly.

Not everyone was upset, though. A local Pepsi sales manager claimed that the amendment to the dress code was long overdue. "For years now, students have been attending class in clothing most inappropriate for Pepsi schools. Now the district is showing its willingness to act as a real partner."

Answering to parental concerns about declining nutritional standards of school foods, the Pepsi representative explained, "There's nothing wrong with a cold, refreshing Pepsi Cola now and then. Especially if it's enjoyed in moderation--like, say, 72 fluid ounces--and part of a well-balanced diet of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and KFC."

In a related development, the District has announced the formation of a committee to re-write the District Mission Statement. "We certainly need to include our allegiance to our corporate sponsors more explicitly," said a spokeswoman. "appallingly, the current Mission Statement makes no mention of the need to profit off of captive children."

"She's absolutely right," said the Pepsi official. "But as long as we keep cooperating this way, it won't be long until the schools accurately reflect the true values of Silicon Valley."