

self-esteem," she snipped. "Nowadays it's the kids who have the power," another teacher told Pat Welsh. "When they don't do the work, and get lower grades, they scream and yell. Parents side with the kids and pressure teachers to lower standards."

Since the 1960s the trend in U.S. schools has been away from authority and formal learning, and toward individual liberation and free expression. "Healthy kids can teach themselves what they need to know" is how Grace Llewellyn puts it in *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*. This inclination shows up in many areas. When, for instance, writing is assigned to secondary school students today, "it tends to take the form of 'personal expression'—with assignments calling for first-person narratives that describe what the student has felt or experienced," notes education expert Daniel Singal. "Essays in which the writer marshals evidence to support a coherent, logical argument are all too rare. Since that kind of exercise might dampen creativity it must be minimized."

Yet as writer and educator Al Lefcowitz points out, creative work only becomes possible after certain rudiments have been mastered. "There are...conventions and forms that really exist and through which one creates.... The kind of return to basics I would like to see...would require rote learning, memorization (including poetry), accurate knowledge of basic facts—when things happened and where things are." Only basic education of this sort, he argues, can get students off the merry-go-round of subjectivity and reconnect them with sources of knowledge outside themselves.

**T**he strange thing about today's emphasis on personal feelings, self-direction, and permissiveness in education is that there is no evidence this helps children learn. Investigations in psychology, human development, and educational theory all demonstrate that, as

Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek summarizes, "man is not born wise, rational, and good, but has to be taught to become so." Learning how to behave, Hayek reminds us, is the source rather than the product of understanding. Today's reluctance to train, polish, and, where necessary, blunt our children's native impulses is thus actually making it harder for them to become insightful and decent human beings.

Editor Brooks Alexander warns against "a breed of young people who have learned to feel good about themselves while behaving in ways that are ruthlessly anti-social." He blames a system of education that resists linking children with the ethics, ideas, and disciplines by which people have traditionally found their place in society, that instead "turns students into autonomous units of will and ego."

Applied to adolescents in particular, the "praise and liberation" method of schooling seems very nearly the opposite of what's needed. Where teens gather there is typically no great shortage of self-indulgence, personal love, or feelings of individual importance. Surveys from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, for instance, show that high school seniors say by four to one that they are "satisfied" with themselves, judge themselves to be a "person of worth," and "take a positive attitude" toward themselves. (Research by Stanley Rothman of Smith College, incidentally, shows that self-esteem levels are at least as high among blacks as among whites.) In moderation, self-regard is healthy. But hard statistical measures show that a majority of today's self-satisfied kids are unable to write a persuasive letter, to date the Civil War, or to calculate simple interest. Given that, a little more self-doubt might not be such a bad thing.

But perhaps the self-esteem emphasis that now dominates our schools is motivated by something other than the long-term interests of students. Is it just a coincidence that the feel-good rationale against "pushing kids too hard" gives lazy parents, teachers, and administra-

## FEEL GOOD GOES TO SCHOOL

**F**or some reason, Staten Island's Public School 5 rose above the expected mess, ranking first among New York City's public schools in standardized reading and math tests. But one thing didn't click. "Pa-

tricia Walsh couldn't figure out how her daughter scored in the ninety ninth percentile in reading, yet could not read street signs," the *New York Post* reported. STOP was baffling; YIELD was unfathomable. Other top graduates at School 5 couldn't do simple addition or write a sentence.

After complaints from parents, the Board of Education's Office of Special Investigations uncovered widespread cheating at School 5, but not by sneaky students. The school's principal, Murray Brenner, "altered answer sheets," charged the Schools Chancellor of New York City. Wrong answers were erased and punched out overlay sheets were used to make the correct circles. Linda Moschello, scoring in the ninety-ninth percentile in math, plummeted to the eighteenth percentile after re-testing.

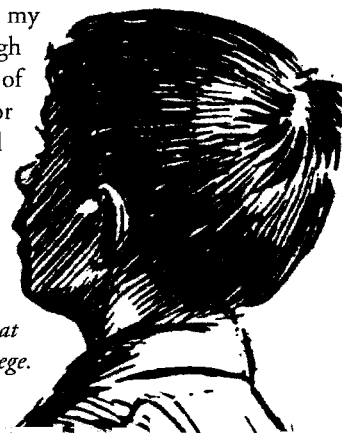
While pleading guilty to an unrelated charge of falsifying business records in the school's supplies account, Brenner

denied the test-tampering charge and retired before the Board took any additional actions. Linda Moschello transferred to a parochial school. "In Catholic school," her mother says, "they almost didn't let her make her Confirmation because she couldn't pass the written test."

Except for being so blatant, the exam-fixing at School 5 isn't all that unusual today. Throughout the system, textbooks and tests are being dumbed-down so students score higher. Students learn less and feel better. In 1992, an international study by the Educational Testing Service shows American students ranking last in math achievement (we trail Slovenia), yet the same students rank first in the world about how good they feel about their math skills.

By contrast, in the 1950s the Catholic grade school in my neighborhood produced high math skills, despite class sizes of 60 and low-paid nuns for teachers. Students were lined up at the classroom door and required to recite multiplication tables before going home for lunch. If any answer was wrong, you didn't eat.

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tors a humane-sounding justification for lower-intensity effort?

High demands scare people. Some students and parents have to be confronted. Teachers must work harder. Schools are held accountable. In the short run, high standards produce more grief for everyone. So the cowardly and indolent follow easier routes. Rather than failing students, for instance, they resort to "social promotion," which is less painful, even if ultimately more harmful.

In today's public schools, "Johnny can't fail," notes professor Bruce Edwards. "No matter how poorly Johnny has performed, our benevolent, paternalistic educational system—the perfect analogue to our welfare system—has by and large found a way to promote Johnny to the next grade." This is malpractice,

plain and simple, but the education establishment has prevented the public from recognizing as much by employing "social justice" arguments. Educators assure us they are protecting "victims"—though the result is often the opposite.

Because there are no incentives for change *within today's* public school monopolies, many educators see no alternative to our current mediocrity. "An alarming number of teachers don't think they can get average kids, the majority of students, to put forth a sufficient effort in school," writes Schmoker. So they complain about the weak motivation of their students while practicing nearly automatic promotion. And grades, which might be used to point out problems to students, "are higher than ever."

Figures from the College Board, which oversees the SAT test, document this decay. In 1972, when data first began to be collected, 28 percent of college-bound seniors reported having an *A* or *B* high school average. By 1993, 83 percent had an *A* or *B* average. Given that the average SAT score fell by 35 points over the same period, this clearly represents outrageous grade inflation.

Schmoker asks, "Can we, in an attempt to be 'encouraging,' be so accommodating and still expect the level of achievement that makes for real self-esteem?" No, he answers. "The best we can do is teach students, in an atmosphere of compassion and perhaps more active participation, that self-respect is earned, often with considerable difficulty, and equip them to earn it."

Sadly, the educators now trivializing curricula and dropping expectations are willing to accept student ignorance as a price of their liberation experiments. "They fear rote learning more than no learning," summarizes Harvard education professor Jeanne Chall. And you will notice that it is usually only individuals who have already benefited from a rigorous basic education who assume that those rigors and those basics are not important for others. They take for granted, and rebel against, the very disciplines that have made them competent individuals. Meanwhile, folks who lack Ivy League decals on the backs of their Volvos tend not to think of drill in spelling, grammar, and algebra as quite so pointless.

The children of the educational liberationists are muddling through today's undemanding schools, because they have books at home, music lessons, Sierra Club vacations, and other middle-class resources to fall back on. The real price is being paid by youngsters from disorganized families—who come to school without much in the way of learning or self-control, and now leave filled with the official insight that success in life comes not so much via perspiration as through inspiration and doing one's own thing. Here as in so many other places, it is the marginal citizens, in whose name the liberationist creed is enacted, who are ultimately its worst victims.

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## "WE WERE WRONG"

Psychologist William Coulson helped found the movement to emphasize "self-esteem" as a path to school success. Today, he travels the country confessing, "I take responsibility. I was part of this approach which has taken over our education system. *We were wrong.*" Coulson now encourages teachers to "stand up for a return to academics. That is really what is needed."

What explains this turnabout? Partly, new research debunking the notion that boosting a child's image of himself brings greater competence. For instance, a recent, exhaustive review of different classroom techniques known as "Project Follow-through" tracked 7,000 children at 139 sites across the country and discovered that the educational models focusing on self-esteem "resulted in lower academic scores than any other model evaluated." On the other hand, the instructional methods that produced the best student performance stressed effective teaching of academics and made no attempt to enhance good feeling except by rewarding good work—on the grounds that self-esteem is simply a byproduct of achievement.

"Critics," summarize the project analysts, "have predicted that the emphasis on tightly controlled instruction might discourage children from freely expressing themselves, and thus inhibit the development of self-esteem and other affective skills." Real-life results, however, show that "In fact, this is not the case."

Leading researchers of self-esteem like Morris Rosenberg, Thomas Moeller, and Alfie Kohn now conclude that self-esteem does little or nothing to enhance academic success. More darkly, pushing the concept may actually bring new problems.

A 1996 study in *Psychological Review*, the Journal of the American Psychological Association, indicates that an artificial emphasis on self-regard can actually increase violence and other anti-social behavior. "Conventional wisdom has regarded low self-esteem as an important cause of violence," note the authors. But this is not what the research shows. "Instead, violence appears to be most commonly a result of threatened egotism—that is, highly favorable views of the self that are disrupted by some person or circumstance."

Many schools today are lowering their grading scales, eliminating honor rolls and honors courses, and doing away with academic competitions like spelling bees and testing with the idea that students will improve their output if only their self-images are lifted. Exercises specifically designed to make students think well of themselves have become part of the curriculum in some places. All this because of a widespread view that, as Bill Clinton put it when he was governor of Arkansas, "a child's self-esteem is the most important contributor to education."

The only problem: None of this is true.

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