

A Recipe for School Chaos

By Matthew Clavel

THE BRONX, NEW YORK—As a fresh Teach For America recruit in the South Bronx four years ago, I learned that the way a school was run could be the most important factor determining the success in my classroom. Here's why.

For the first hour or so every morning, most of my fourth graders would sit quietly, work diligently, and strive for praise from the teacher. As the day wore on, though, they would get jumpy. Our routines got weaker and weaker as lunchtime approached.

Any slight interruption, any disturbance in our delicate momentum, could cause heads to swivel around and an inexplicable murmur—it actually sounded like “mrmrrrrr...”—to erupt and swell throughout the room. That's why announcements on the public address system could be so exasperating. I would be leading a discussion on a story, or explaining a math problem, and suddenly I couldn't hear myself:

“Mrs. Bright, please contact the main office. Mrs. Bright, please contact the main office.” It was all my kids needed. “Mrmrmrmrmrrrrrrr...”

“I need to see everyone's eyes up here. Troy, let go of her hair. I like how Tiffany is sitting quietly—nice job. Maurice, those chips are off limits until lunch. Who can tell me another way to write two fourths?”

“Mrrrrr...mrrr...”

This was an inner-city classroom, and the children needed to be left alone to focus. Couldn't my school's administra-

tors see that? Apparently it was easier for people in the main office to disturb the entire school of 1,500 students in order to track down one person. All day every day we were beset by inane announcements:

....

“Mrs. Bright, please call the main office... (long pause) Mrs. Bright, Joanie in the office needs to talk to you.”

....

“All money for the candy sale needs to be in by next week. All money for the candy sale *must* be in by next week, or it will not be valid. Please make a note of it.”

....

“Could I have everyone's attention, PLEASE. The second grade math workbooks have arrived. Please send two monitors to Ms. Ewing on the first floor.”

....

I am not exaggerating. On bad days, we'd endure 20 or more concentration-wrecking announcements. This was a very big deal. It was already difficult to capture the attention of these children. And here we were being actively undermined by a lazy administration.

There were plenty of other interruptions. Almost every Friday afternoon (do I need to tell you the kids were already itchy on Fridays?), a motley band of interrupters invaded my classroom. I actually jotted down the people who came in one day: a school nurse, a rep from the parent association, a security guard who seemed to want nothing more than to play with a couple of my students, then another teacher asking what time it was.



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During the rest of the week, administrators pestered us with questions. And every day a few kids would get picked up for “Resource Room,” speech therapy, a special reading class, you name it. I knew that little was being taught in some of these special programs, and would have preferred they skip my classroom. After each disruption had run its course I had to fight to establish order again.

The kids were already unable to pay attention adequately. Some of them had chronic problems with interrupting me or their peers, constantly calling out without raising their hands. Almost all of them were far behind where they should have been at their age. This situation was made much worse thanks to adult carelessness at the school.

For me as a teacher, it was hard to deal with the unprofessionalism. For my children, it was a pedagogical disaster.

Matthew Clavel taught school in Harlem and the Bronx, and is now writing a book on education reform.

Inner Drives on the Hard Drive

By Marilyn Penn

NEW YORK CITY—I started playing Scrabble over the Internet last year. It's allowed me to make some interesting discoveries—about games, about people who play them, and about the influence of the World Wide Web.

Players on the games.com site I use must register their "handles" if they want to be rated. This offers a double bonus: a chance for self-expression, plus complete anonymity. Names range from the benign to the salacious, with many permutations in between. I've played with "cheater" (he was), "sexylegs," (a strong player despite the image), and "myway-isall" (a quitter when it wasn't). I've learned to be wary of players who've given themselves aggressive names (like "warlord")—not because their owners play more fiercely, but because they seem to get vindictive when they fall behind.

You would think that people who enjoy a cerebral, sedentary pastime like Scrabble would be on the gentle side of the human spectrum. Lovers of vocabulary are not your stereotypical swimmers with sharks. But we get our share of bad losers. If an online Scrabble player decides not to move at all, there is nothing his opponent can do to force him. If the board is idle long enough, both players will be disconnected, and both will have points deducted from their rating. This fault allows a spiteful loser to prevent the victor from profiting from his conquest.

Players are highly competitive. That's a good thing for those who wish to keep honing their skills. Many of the most unusual words I've picked up have been at the losing end, as my opponent whipped out *gloze*, *killdee*, *woald*, or *jiao*.

But I wasn't prepared for the nastiness on the chat bar, the spiteful sabotaging of games, or the lewdness of what I hope are adolescents blowing off steam. These ugly

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aspects of my hobby are entirely byproducts of playing on the Web, I've decided. The Internet is like a masked ball—you can act out your wildest fantasies without being recognized or stigmatized. This fuels unstable people to misbehave more freely more often.

Anonymity bestows power on insecure people. And the Internet facilitates immediate exposure and gratification for show-offs. Last week, some pervert sullied the air with a riff about defecation and sex that lasted for about 20 minutes. There was no one to shut him up, and no way to boot him off. Occasionally, other players will object to the prurience, but that often just gives the closet exhibitionist an extra thrill. I'm surprised that people choose a Scrabble site for these displays, but perhaps they get an extra frisson from shocking quiet people.

Playing any game on line allows an individual the privacy to cheat. You can always tell when someone is looking up a word before deciding whether to challenge—there's a time lag before the challenge button is pushed. Some cheaters use a word descrambler on another Web site, something you obviously couldn't do in person. If you aren't competitive about your own ratings, playing against a partner aided by a computer can make the game more challenging. Of course the game becomes completely one-sided and unfair.

Quitting when you're losing is another low tactic. Quitters prevent the other guy from gaining points, even if he's earned them. This is generally not tolerated in face-to-face games.

On the Web, though, no one knows who you are, and you are free to abrogate the rules of good sportsmanship and revert

to a more primal state. Recently I played against a woman who was 200 points behind. She refused to go gently into the night, and instead kept putting her letters in places that connected high scoring words, effectively creating nonsense words. The first time she did this I challenged her and of course her word was removed. By the third time I decided to let her get away with "quiverwvjoust" (80 points), because I realized she'd keep on doing it and I really just wanted to end the game.

On the positive side, having played with participants from all over the world I can say that most people are friendly, spirited, and conscientious. I've locked horns with students, grandpas, young mothers, and people at work (I hope they're bosses and not employees). One day I had some carpet cleaners in my home, and while I waited for them to finish I logged on to a game. One of the workers, a strapping young body-builder, kept glancing over at what I was doing. Assuming that he hadn't seen this site before, I proceeded to explain. "I know," he said, "I play on that site. I was looking at your moves to see if I agreed with what you were doing."

My favorite opponent was a Korean man playing from Seoul. His chats were formal and revealed that he had not been raised speaking English. Nevertheless, he was beating me handily, and close to the end of the game, when there were just a few tiles left, I conceded that he would win since I was holding the "q" with no place to put it. "I shall try to make a space for you," he said with grace, and he did.

I played my "q," but was delighted that he won anyway. He didn't abandon decency just because no one knew who he was. He carried it the extra mile, to a grand gesture of gallantry. I shall remember that much longer than the score of any win I'll ever attain.

Marilyn Penn recently scored 284 points for one word in online Scrabble.

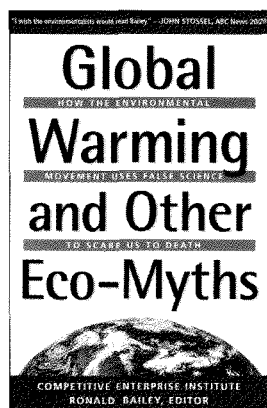


BookTalk

GREEN DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

By William Leon

*Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths:
How the Environmental Movement Uses
False Science to Scare Us to Death*
Edited by Ronald Bailey
Prima Publishing, 320 pages, \$24.95



Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths, a new book edited by Reason magazine's science editor Ronald Bailey, breaks no startling new ground. It does gather an

impressive array of researchers to explain that the things environmentalists think they know aren't necessarily so. *Global Warming* follows up its injection of pertinent reality into public debate by demonstrating the links between environmentalists' bad science and their worse policies.

Take energy policy. Environmentalist solutions to non-existent energy shortages seem grounded more in science fiction than science fact. One of the most frequently proposed solutions is the fuel cell. Fuel cells emit no potentially dangerous gases into the atmosphere because they are not based on combustion. Instead, they chemically transform hydrogen into electricity. The devices are generally safe, quiet, efficient, and non-

polluting. The technology is already in use in spaceships and as back-up power sources for hospitals and some vehicles.

They have serious drawbacks, however. *Global Warming* explains that the hydrogen which powers the cells has to come from somewhere—and that's usually natural gas, propane, or gasoline. While the cells are "clean" once generating, Greenies ignore the environmental impact of producing the hydrogen needed to fuel them. Creating hydrogen throws off emissions, including more carbon dioxide than is emitted by reformulated gasoline. In addition, hydrogen contains only one sixth the amount of energy of a comparable volume of gasoline. That means much larger tanks and many more refills will be necessary.

"Renewable" and "environmentally friendly" energy sources, despite the cries of activists, remain niche technologies—too costly or unruly for general use, compared to our mainstays of coal, natural gas, oil, and nuclear power. Innovation may eventually improve alternative energies' prospects, but so far, even with substantial government subsidies, progress has been slow. The Energy Information Agency predicts that by 2020 all "renewable" energy sources will account for less than 4 percent of the U.S. energy supply. In 1999 they contributed 3.37 percent.

Ironically, environmentalists often *slow* the pace of technological progress, rather than speeding it. While the American public sees many benefits in advancing knowledge and science, environmentalists see problems lurking behind every corner. In

order to prevent "disaster," they insist that science and technology must be proven absolutely risk free before even being considered for use. The premier battleground for this philosophy has been agricultural biotechnology. A London University biologist calls genetically modified (G.M.) crops "worse than nuclear weapons or radioactive waste," while activist Jeremy Rifkin calls their introduction "the most radical, uncontrolled experiment we've ever seen." When the U.S. sent a shipment of corn and soy meal that included some G.M. varieties to aid the victims of a cyclone in India, activist Vandana Shiva declared that "the U.S. has been using the... victims as guinea pigs." (American consumers have been eating this food for years.)

This mindless resistance to new science has dire consequences. Having been informed by Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth that G.M. corn is "poison," the president of Zambia refused U.S. food aid, despite widespread starvation in his country. As Professor Tony Trewavas from the Royal Society of Edinburgh recognizes: "We would never have developed electricity, gas, or aeroplanes, or trains, or anything if we had ever taken that principle to heart in life."

Biotechnology is a boon to mankind. G.M. crops can raise farm yields, reduce the use of pesticides, and let farmers conserve precious topsoil. Biotech researchers can create plants that grow more quickly, resist drought and disease, endure temperature extremes, and provide increased human nutrition.

Activists like Shiva argue, along