

## Shades of Blue

The Rockford Public Schools, as longtime readers of *Chronicles* know, have seen more than their fair share of troubles. With the end, in June 2002, of the 13-year-long desegregation suit and its accompanying rule by the federal courts, and the hiring of Dennis Thompson as superintendent in 2004, however, the school board has begun to get the district's financial house in order—although next year's \$300 million budget for just under 28,000 students can hardly be called a model of fiscal restraint. Still, the district is now running a budget surplus and chipping away at decades of accumulated debt. This November, voters will be asked to renew a hefty tax levy, passed in 2002, to keep the district moving in the right direction.

Which makes now a rather bad time for bad press, from the district's standpoint. So the headline of *Rockford Register Star* political editor Chuck Sweeny's June 20 column, "What's the Hidden Meaning in Da Warrior Code?" must have caused some consternation down at district headquarters.

The closing of Rockford's West High School in the late 1980's prompted the desegregation lawsuit, and, in the fall-out, the school was ultimately reopened as West Middle School. This year, West held a "rites of passage" ceremony—one of those pseudograduations that parents have come to demand and that those teachers and administrators who are more concerned with building up "self-esteem" than with actually educating are all-too-eager to stage. At the ceremony, every child was issued a certificate, which is where Chuck's story descends into the bizarre:

The document repeated "Rites of Passage," followed by this:

"That's what I think of the New Earth are all about [*sic*]. I think they are here to change it, they are here to change it through their giftedness, then they will change it through their power, their ability to destroy, and tear down." It ends with the date, "May 30, 2006," and "Leslie Smith . . . Principal." . . . [W]e read this paragraph over

and over, trying to glean hidden meaning. Was there a secret instruction intended by the use of the words "destroy" and "tear down?" Were there words missing in the first sentence? What is the New Earth? Hmmm. Had Mary Magdalene been posing as a West student?

The rest of Chuck's column details his Tom Hanks-like attempts to find out what the quotation means. Along the way, he gathers some choice remarks from the school district's attorney, Steve Katz:

"That document is indecipherable. It's impossible to understand what that thing says. As soon as he saw it, the superintendent was alarmed. . . . The first thing that strikes you is what the hell does this mean? There's no way you can understand it," Katz said.

Superintendent Dennis Thompson spoke with Smith and was "satisfied that there's nothing dark, menacing or worrisome intended. It supposedly was represented as a quote from another source, and words got dropped in the transposition [*sic*]. That begs the question, who proofread it?" Katz said.

No, actually, it raises more important questions: What did the original quotation say, and where did it come from? A little Googling around, and I quickly discovered the answer to the first question:

That's what I think these Children of the New Earth are all about. I think they are here to change our world because our world needs changing. And if we don't let them change it through their giftedness, then they'll change it through their power, their ability to destroy and tear down.

Since the complete quotation is hardly less disturbing than the mangled version (though perhaps slightly less violent), Superintendent Thompson might want a fuller explanation from Principal Smith.



Many—indeed, most—of the parents of the eighth-graders at West would likely find this passage worrisome, particularly once they find out more about the author, G.W. Hardin.

The text is from Hardin's book *Indigo Rising: Awakening the Powers of the Children of the New Earth*. A p.r. webpage can be found at [AtTheThreshold.com](http://AtTheThreshold.com). There, Hardin offers excerpts from the book, under the heading "Seven rules for ritual in rites of passage":

1. Help the boy or girl find an Elder or Wise Man/Woman in whom there can be trust. . . . These Elders should have experience in the sacred or the spiritual, and they should be able to put that experience to use through ritual.

2. Include your spouse in the planning stages. If you are a single mother, strongly consider bringing in a male who knows and loves your daughter to help with the planning. Single fathers, strongly consider bringing in a mother figure. In such cases, you may wish to have a series of rituals rather than a single major ritual, spanning a couple of years . . .

This is clearly New Age religion, at best; thus, it's not surprising to read, on Hardin's bio page for *Indigo Rising*, that:

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author, G.W. Hardin is the author of *THE DAYS OF WONDER* and co-author of two other books: *THE MESSENGERS*, which hit bestselling lists all over the country for three months, and *ON THE WINGS OF HEAVEN*, a true story of angelic messages for humanity. As a successful software engi-

neer with one of the top computer companies in the world, Hardin thought he had it made . . . until he contracted an incurable disease in 1983, which ended his high-tech career. For four years he scavenged the medical world for help before being diagnosed with a disease which would ravage his skin for the rest of his life. Or so modern medicine thought. . . . Hardin subjected himself to hypnosis where the therapist simply asked for the cause of the disease, thus prompting his first angelic experience. It was the angel who told him his purpose in life and how he had evaded that purpose. And on completion of the angelic visit, the author was completely cured.

The "Indigo Children" are not Hardin's creation; as with the angel craze, he's simply jumping on a bandwagon that had reached such popular outlets as ABC's *Good Morning America* by November 2005 and has roots as far back as the writings of Edgar Cayce. Even more disturbing than Hardin's New Age beliefs, however, is the not-so-subtle sexual cast of his "Seven rules for ritual in rites of passage," considering that Principal Smith was introducing this text to eighth-graders. Again, a glance at Hardin's bio reveals more than we might wish to know:

He has been a featured speaker at professional gatherings and at colleges and universities, lecturing on topics ranging from the "Seven Gifts of Heaven for Humanity" to "The Role of Angels in the Modern World" to "The Sacred Power of Being Gay."

And here's one of those "angelic messages for humanity" from Hardin's book *On the Wings of Heaven*:

As long as humankind has walked the earth, there have been people who are gay—perfect, whole and complete just the way they are. You see, the more a religion gets accepted, the more self-righteous it becomes in good-versus-evil. When outside forces begin to let up, pressure begins building from within for conformity, beginning with the smallest number of members who act differently or think differently from the majority. The

religion's actions become no better than those of its earlier persecutors. However, their persecution is now done in the name of God or Jesus or the Bible.

And there's much more out there, such as Hardin's disturbing interview in the May 2000 issue of the defunct homosexual publication *OutSpoken* ([missoula.bigsky.net/outspoken/05-2000/warren.htm](http://missoula.bigsky.net/outspoken/05-2000/warren.htm)) with lesbian activist Patricia Nell Warren about her work with "queer (GLBT) teens."

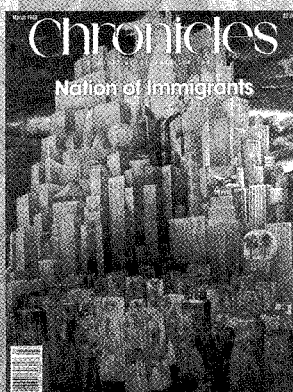
No matter what one's religious beliefs or views on homosexuality, it should be clear to everyone involved that Principal Smith had no business distributing this passage to eighth-grade students in a public school. School-board member Mike Williams agrees—though, he told me, he also suspects that the mangling of the quotation on the certificate was intentional. "I think the grammatical errors were not actually so, but truly meant to mask the real message. I agree . . . that parents would be very upset if they know the context of this encrypted quotation." Williams has provided the full quotation and information on G.W. Hardin to the other members of the school board and

the district administration. So far, the response has been muted. In a district this size, board members are far too disconnected from students and parents.

Whether anything will come of Williams' concern is uncertain. Leslie Smith has made a point of working with troubled black youth, especially boys, even going so far as to become a foster father for one. (Smith is black himself.) And, as Chuck Sweeny noted in his column,

Smith had already been re-assigned to a new job when the Rites of Passage ceremony took place. He won't be back at West Middle School. His new posting is dean of students at Guilford High School.

Given the influence that Smith would have on impressionable high-school students, Superintendent Thompson might want to reconsider that posting. At the very least, he will undoubtedly want to discuss the writings of G.W. Hardin at length with Principal Smith, to determine how closely they reflect Smith's own vision of youth today. A misstep now might be very costly for the school district come Election Day. ©



## Defending the Homeland America's Immigration Crisis

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## Letter From Arizona

by Tim Siefert

### Tax Credits and Education Reform: No Simple Task



Over the last decade, the state of Arizona has made ground-breaking attempts at K-12 education reform. A 1997 law allowing taxpayers to steer a portion of their state income-tax liability toward a student at a private school now provides significant scholarship aid each year to 22,500 of the 54,000 students enrolled in private schools. With over one million of Arizona's students still in public schools, however, the results of the movement are difficult to measure.

Incorporated by the state and regulated by the federal government's 501(c)3 tax-exemption rules, School Tuition Organizations (STOs) have thrived and multiplied into a battalion of 54 organized nonprofit businesses in less than a decade. Unlike vouchers or government subsidies for low-income families, privately run nonprofit STOs solicit their own donors, rather than rely on a handout from the state. Before they can fund a single child's scholarship, they have to persuade individual donors to make a significant contribution and to take a credit on next year's taxes, which is no simple task.

What began in 1997 as a \$500 tax credit has now grown to a maximum of \$1,000 per year, which a taxpayer can donate to the organization of his choice, then take as a dollar-for-dollar credit against his state income-tax liability. (Arizonans have five years to apply the credit to their state tax bill.) In 2005, almost 70,000 taxpayers made donations, but, with almost 2.5 million individual income-tax returns filed statewide, that represents fewer than three percent of taxpayers. There's plenty of room to grow.

By law, each STO must turn at least 90 percent of the funds it collects into scholarships for students. Beyond that, STOs market themselves in a variety of ways—from need-based scholarships to those based on a student's academic merit (regardless of family income) to any combi-

nation of community service or academic criteria. And most, if not every, private school has now either contracted with an STO or created its own. That marriage of fundraising, fund distributing, and the delivery of benefits to the schools and their families has created an economically and politically powerful group of tax-credit advocates. And like all advocacy groups, they have a desire to protect their entitlement—for their own schools, their own children, and their own tax dollars.

This, in turn, creates an atmosphere of accountability for the ultimate disposition of the funds. It also boosts efficiency, because the donation does not pass through the state treasury. STOs are actually private corporations governed by a board of directors, often parents or grandparents who are likely to have been active in the school-choice movement.

Most STOs allow the donor to recommend that a scholarship recipient be some deserving student at a particular school. Some even allow a donor to recommend an individual student by name, as long as he is not the donor's dependent. In fact, if a donor wants his donation to be used for Native Americans, single-parent families, or families with a large number of children, there are a number of organizations that are happy to fulfill his wish. Rather than creating an unnecessary layer of government-regulated administrative bureaucracy, the law actually stimulates competition among organizations for each donor.

Naturally, among the first institutions to market the tax credit and create STOs were the Catholic schools in the dioceses of Phoenix and Tucson and multiple-campus religious schools. These professional educators already had an enterprise in place to take advantage of the opportunity to finance their students' tuition bills. This was an instant financial boost to those organizations that were funding scholarships based on need. Now, pastors and principals no longer have to distribute a limited amount of tuition waivers to poor families, and bishops need not redistribute income from wealthy parish schools to poor ones. Families need only to apply to the STO, submit a financial statement and tax return, and receive an award based on objective financial need.

Next in line came the more esoteric

private schools, including homeschooling co-op groups who simply turned to their handful of existing parents for donations, essentially turning their own tax dollars into scholarships for their own children.

Overall, however, after nearly a decade, the private-school market has not yet responded to the new money coming in from STOs. The money has gone not to help build new private schools but to fund tuition for students already in private-school classrooms. In fact, few private schools in the Phoenix area even have openings for new students. That's partly the result of the introduction of charter schools, which receive state funds for operational needs but need to beg or borrow for capital and classroom space.

One factor that may explain the lackluster effects of the STOs is Arizona's record-setting population growth over the last ten years. Students are not moving from school to school, because there are enough students being imported to satiate all the schools, public or private. Even with Arizona's annual population growth rate of 3.5 percent for the last decade, few private schools have built new classroom space or opened new campuses. Moreover, many schools just raised their tuition costs to respond to the supply of students and parents who are now able to pay a little more for tuition, thanks to the extra help from STOs. Some schools explain to parents who balk at the increase that they should simply apply for scholarships and encourage others to make tax-credit donations to fund them.

When the income-tax-credit law was passed, there seemed to be as many different reasons given to support it as there were legislators who voted for it. Overall, there were five: It would help some poor kids to gain access to private schools; it would help middle-class parents better afford a better education; it would create a larger supply of students competing to attend private schools; it would pressure public schools to be more competitive; and it would provide a just way to reimburse parents for putting their children in private schools that would not burden the taxpayers. Having watched this particular legislative process, I am amazed that courts try to intuit and interpret "legislative intent" when deciding the application of the law.

Nonetheless, the tax-credit policy has