



On Target

AFT Local #2569

November 2018



Clarence Teachers Make the Difference

November 21, 2018

How to talk turkey about teaching at the Thanksgiving table

Source: NYSUT Communications



Ah, Thanksgiving, that time of year when family gathers around the table and that one uncle starts bashing unions, while your annoying cousin complains teachers are paid too much.

Sure, you can scream silently while you pick at your stuffing.

But here are a few comebacks you can try when you're hit with those crazy comments about unions and education.

TENURE

Q: The problem with unions is they make it impossible to get rid of bad teachers. They have a job for life!

A: You're talking about tenure, right? It's been part of state law for 100 years, and it doesn't mean a job for life. In fact, it doesn't protect bad teachers. Tenure — which teachers have to earn, by the way — simply means a teacher can't be terminated without just cause and a fair hearing.

TESTING

Q: Why do teachers always complain about test scores? Shouldn't they be judged on the performance of their students?

A: Teachers teach because they want students to grow. But using a score from a single state test to determine a teacher's job performance is as crazy as it is unfair. Why should a teacher in the Bronx be judged the same way as a teacher in Scarsdale or Saranac Lake? Their students face completely different challenges. Teachers should be judged on multiple measures determined at the local level — not by some random state test.

SALARIES

Q: The taxes in this state are crazy, high teacher salaries are big reason why!

A: High? The average teacher salary in this state is \$66,000 — even though teachers are among the most educated professionals in today's workforce. Their job requires a master's degree, passage of state exams and continual training just to keep their licenses. The fact is the average teacher salary is far below what the corporate world pays for jobs requiring the same, or less, professional training. By the way, teachers are taxpayers too. But we know that strong teachers mean strong schools, which is good for the whole community.

SUMMER

Q: Must be nice to get paid for doing nothing all summer!

A: The only ones who have summers off are students. Teachers spend their summers working second jobs, teaching summer school, and attending training programs to remain certified or advance their careers. They also spend summer writing new curriculum, mentoring new teachers in their district and attending meetings at their schools. That's all work, by the way, they are basically doing for free since teachers are only paid for the days they are contracted to work during the school year. That's hardly having the summer off.

• Unions – Forces of Evil????

NYSUT welcomes Regents extension of moratorium on tying flawed tests to evaluations

Source: NYSUT Media Relations

ALBANY, N.Y. Nov. 5, 2018 — New York State United Teachers today released the following statement after the Regents extended the moratorium on tying state standardized test scores to teacher evaluations:

"We welcome the extension of the moratorium and thank Chancellor Betty Rosa and the Regents for continuing to recognize that the state's over-emphasis on standardized testing has worked for neither students nor teachers. While we welcome the moratorium extension, NYSUT will continue to seek a long-term legislative solution that will return evaluations to local control. Teachers and local school districts know what works best in their own communities."

New York State United Teachers is a statewide union with more than 600,000 members in education, human services and health care. NYSUT is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.

• Editor's Note

Each month the On Target will come out near the end of the month.

If you have something that you would like included, please send as a **Word document** by the 20th of the month to:
lpnek@clarenceschools.org

Items that could be included are: Articles dealing with education/unions, Good ideas for teaching, something humorous/light dealing with education, Information for sharing, Opinion pieces on education, Advertisement for a service you provide.

NOVEMBER 13, 2018

LISTS
**IF PEOPLE TALKED TO OTHER
PROFESSIONALS THE WAY THEY TALK
TO TEACHERS**

BY SHANNON REED

“Ah, a zookeeper. So, you just babysit the animals all day?”

- - -

“My colon never acts this way at home. Are you sure you’re reading the colonoscopy results correctly? Did you ever think that maybe you just don’t like my colon?”

- - -

“I’d love to just play with actuary statistics all day. That would be so fun! I bet you don’t even feel like you’re at work!”

- - -

“You’re a sanitation worker, huh? I hated my garbage collectors when I was growing up. One of them once yelled at me when I stood directly in front of their truck and kept it from completing its appointed rounds, and ever since then I’ve just loathed all of them, everywhere.”

- - -

“So you run a ski lodge? Do you just, like, chill during the summer? Must be nice.”

- - -

“Since my singer-songwriter thing isn’t taking off yet, I’ve been thinking about going into lawyer-ing. I mean, how hard can it be? I know criminals like me, or at least the two that I see once a year at Thanksgiving do.”

- - -

“I bet that’s the best part of being a banker — all the free money!”

- - -

“Do you even read your patients’ charts, or do you just assign them a random dosage based on how nice they’ve been to you?”

- - -

“Before you give me a ticket, Officer, I just wanted to mention: My taxes pay your salary.”

- - -

“Excuse me, my seven-year-old son, who mere minutes ago lied about whether he had to pee or not, just told me that you wouldn’t give him any ketchup even though he says he asked for it politely. Now I’m going to ask the manager to move us to another server’s table, and also fire you.”

- - -

“Sure, the pay is low, but I bet the joy of putting together press releases for local events is reason enough to stick with this job in the events division of the Chamber of Commerce. You must really believe in its mission.”



• Changing Times

November 14, 2018

Middle School Misfortunes Then and Now, One Teacher's Take



By: Benjamin Conlon

Let's imagine a seventh grader. He's a quiet kid, polite, with a few friends. Just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill twelve-year-old. We'll call him Brian. Brian's halfway through seventh grade and for the first time, he's starting to wonder where he falls in the social hierarchy at school. He's thinking about his clothes a little bit, his shoes too. He's conscious of how others perceive him, but he's not *that* conscious of it.

He goes home each day and from the hours of 3 p.m. to 7 a.m., he has a break from the social pressures of middle school. Most evenings, he doesn't have a care in the world. The year is 2008.

Brian has a cell phone, but it's off most of the time. After all, it doesn't do much. If friends want to get in touch, they call the house. The only time large groups of seventh graders come together is at school dances. If Brian feels uncomfortable with that, he can skip the dance. He can talk to teachers about day-to-day problems. Teachers have pretty good control over what happens at school.

Now, let's imagine Brian on a typical weekday. He goes downstairs and has breakfast with his family. His mom is already at work, but his dad and sisters are there. They talk to each other over bowls of cereal. The kids head off to school soon after. Brian has a fine morning in his seventh grade classroom and walks down to the lunchroom at precisely 12 p.m.

There's a slick of water on the tiled floor near the fountain at the back of the cafeteria. A few eighth graders know about it, and they're laughing as yet another student slips and tumbles to the ground.

Brian buys a grilled cheese sandwich. It comes with tomato soup that no one ever eats. He polishes off the sandwich and heads to the nearest trashcan to dump the soup. When his sneakers hit the water slick, he slips just like the others. The tomato soup goes up in the air and comes down on his lap.

Nearby, at the table of eighth graders, a boy named Mark laughs. He laughs at Brian the same way the boys around him laugh at Brian. They laugh because they're older, and they know something the younger kids don't. They laugh at the slapstick nature of the fall. The spilled tomato soup is a bonus. The fall is a misfortune for Brian. That's all. It's not an asset for Mark. A few kids hear the laughter and look over, but Brian gets up quickly and rushes off to the bathroom to change into his gym shorts.

Mark tries to retell the story to a friend later. The friend doesn't really get it because he wasn't there. He can't picture it. In fact, Mark seems a little mean for laughing at all.

After lunch, Brian returns to homeroom in his gym shorts. No one seems to notice the change. He breathes a sigh of relief. The cafeteria fall is behind him. He meets his sisters at the end of the day and they ask why he's wearing gym shorts. He tells them he spilled some tomato sauce on his pants. They head home and spend the afternoon and evening together, safe and sound, home life completely separate from school life. Brian doesn't think about the incident again. Only a few people saw it. It's over.

Now, let's imagine Brian again. Same kid. Same family. Same school. He's still in seventh grade, but this time it's 2018.

When Brian sits down for breakfast, his dad is answering an email at the table. His older sister is texting, and his younger sister is playing a video game. Brian has an iPhone too. He takes it out and opens the Instagram app. The Brian from 2008 was *wondering* about his position in the social hierarchy. The Brian from 2018 *knows*. He can see it right there on the screen. He has fewer 'followers' than the other kids in his grade. That's a problem. He wants to ask his father what to do, but there's that email to be written. Instead, Brian thinks about it all morning at school. While his teacher talks, he slips his phone out and checks to see how many 'followers' the other kids in class have. The answer doesn't help his confidence. At precisely 12 p.m., he heads to the cafeteria. He buys a grilled cheese. It comes with tomato soup that no one ever eats.

At the back of the lunchroom, Mark sits with the other eighth graders. He holds a shiny new iPhone in one hand. Mark has had an iPhone for five years. He's got all the apps. Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. He's got lots of followers too. He doesn't know all of them, but that's okay.

A few years ago, Mark made his first Instagram post. It was a picture of his remote control car. Mark used to really enjoy remote control cars. Mark checked Instagram an hour after putting up that first picture. A bright red dot showed at the bottom of the page. He clicked it. Someone had 'liked' the picture of the car. Mark felt validated. It was good that he posted the picture. A little bit of dopamine was released into Mark's brain. He checked the picture an hour later. Sure enough, another 'like'. More dopamine. He felt even better.

For a while, pictures of the remote control car were sufficient. They generated enough 'likes' to keep Mark happy. He no longer got much joy from actually *driving* the remote control car, but he got plenty from seeing those 'likes' pile up.

Then something started to happen. The 'likes' stopped coming in. People didn't seem interested in the pictures of the car anymore. This made Mark unhappy. He missed the 'likes' and the dopamine that came with them. He needed them back. He needed more exciting pictures, because exciting pictures would bring more views and more 'likes'. So, he decided to drive his car right out into the middle of the road. He had his little brother film the whole thing. He filmed the remote control car as it got flattened by a passing truck. Mark didn't bother to collect it. He just grabbed his phone and posted the video. It was only a few minutes before the 'likes' started coming in. He felt better.

Now it's eighth grade and Mark has become addicted to social media. Sure, he needs a lot more 'likes' to get the same feeling, but that's okay. That just means he needs more content. Good content. Content no one else has. That's the kind that gets a lot of 'likes', really, really fast. Mark has learned the best content comes from filming and posting the embarrassing experiences of classmates.

When he notices that water slick at the back of the cafeteria, he's ready. Each time someone walks by and falls, their misfortune becomes an asset for Mark. A part of Mark wants them to fall. He *hopes* they fall.

Brian walks across the cafeteria with his soup, minding his own business. Suddenly, his feet slide out from under him. The tomato soup goes up in the air and comes down on his lap. He's so embarrassed, that when he stands up and rushes off to the bathroom, he doesn't notice Mark filming.

Mark's fingers race over his iPhone screen before Brian is out of sight. That was a great video he just took, and he wants to get it online. Fast. He knows he's not *supposed* to have his cell phone out in school, but the teachers really only enforce that rule during class. They all use Twitter and Instagram too. They understand.

Mark doesn't know *who* he just filmed, and he doesn't care. It's not *his* fault the kid fell on the floor. He's just the messenger. The video is a kind of public service announcement. He's just warning everyone else about the water spot in the cafeteria. That's what Mark tells himself.

He gets the video uploaded to Snapchat first. No time for a caption. It speaks for itself. He has it up on Instagram seconds later. By then, the 'likes' are already coming in. Dopamine floods into Mark's brain. There's a comment on Instagram already! "What a loser!" it says. Mark gives the comment a 'like'. Best to keep the audience happy.

This has been a rewarding lunch. The bell's going to ring in a few minutes. Mark sits back and refreshes his screen again and again and again until it does.

Meanwhile, Brian heads back from the bathroom, having changed into his gym shorts. He's still embarrassed about the fall. It happened near the back of the cafeteria, though. He doesn't think many people saw. He *hopes* they didn't. But when he walks into the classroom, a lot of people look at him. One girl holds her phone up at an odd angle. Is she...taking a picture? The phone comes down quickly and she starts typing, so he can't be sure.

Class begins. Brian is confused because people keep slipping their phones out and glancing back at him. He asks to go to the bathroom. Inside a stall, he opens Instagram. There he is on the screen, covered in tomato sauce. How could this be? Who filmed this? Below the video, a new picture has just appeared. It's him in his gym shorts. The caption reads, "Outfit change!"

Brian scrolls frantically through the feed trying to find the source of the video. He can't. It's been shared and reshared too many times. He notices his follower count has dropped. He doesn't want to go to class. He just wants it to stop.

He meets his sisters outside at the end of the day. Several students snap pictures as he walks by. Neither sister says a word. Brian knows why.

Home was a safe place for Brian in 2008. Whatever happened in school, stayed in school. Not now. Brian arrives at his house, heart thundering, and heads straight to his bedroom. He's supposed to be doing homework, but he can't concentrate. Alone in the dark, he refreshes his iPhone again and again and again and again.

Brian's family is having his favorite dish for dinner, but he doesn't care. He wants it to be over so he can get back to his phone. Twice, he goes to the bathroom to check Instagram. His parents don't mind, they're checking their own phones.

Brian discovers that two new versions of the video have been released. One is set to music and the other has a nasty narration. Both have lots of comments. He doesn't know how to fight back, so he just watches as the view counts rise higher and higher. His own follower count, his *friend* count, keeps going in the opposite direction. Brian doesn't want to be part of this. He doesn't like this kind of thing. He can't skip it though. It's not like the dance. And he can't tell a teacher. This isn't happening at school.

He stays up all night refreshing the feed, hoping the rising view count will start to slow. Mark is doing the same thing at the other side of town. He has lots of new followers. This is his best video ever.

At 3 a.m., they both turn off their lights and stare up at their respective ceilings. Mark smiles. He hopes tomorrow something even more embarrassing happens to a different kid. Then he can film *that* and get even *more* 'likes'. Across town, Brian isn't smiling, but sadly, he's hoping for exactly the same thing.

From the Author

I started teaching in 2009. At that time, public school was very much the way I remembered it. That's not the case anymore. Smartphones and social media have transformed students into creatures craving one thing: content. It's a sad state of affairs.

But there's hope.

Over the last few years, my students have become increasingly interested in stories from the days *before* smartphones and social media. In the same way many adults look back fondly on simpler times, kids look back to second and third grade, when no one had a phone. I think a lot of them already miss those days.

Smartphones and social media aren't going anywhere. Both are powerful tools, with many benefits. But they have fundamentally altered how children interact with the world and not in a good way. We can change that. In addition to the "Wait Until 8th" pledge, consider taking the following steps to help your children reclaim childhood.

1. Propose that administrators and teachers stop using social media for school related purposes. In many districts teachers are encouraged to employ Twitter and Instagram for classroom updates. This is a bad thing. It

normalizes the process of posting content without consent and teaches children that everything exciting is best viewed through a recording iPhone. It also reinforces the notion that 'likes' determine value. Rather than reading tweets from your child's teacher, talk to your children each day. Ask what's going on in school. They'll appreciate it.

2. Insist that technology education include a unit on phone etiquette, the dark sides of social media and the long-term ramifications of posting online. Make sure students hear from individuals who have unwittingly and unwillingly been turned into viral videos.
3. Tell your children stories from your own childhood. Point out how few of them could have happened if smartphones had been around. Remind your children that they will some day grow up and want stories of their own. An afternoon spent online doesn't make for very good one.
4. Teach your children that boredom is important. They *should* be bored. Leonardo Da Vinci was bored. So was Einstein. Boredom breeds creativity and new ideas and experiences. Cherish boredom.
5. Remind them that, as the saying goes, adventures don't come calling like unexpected cousins. They have to be found. Tell them to go outside and explore the real world. Childhood is fleeting. It shouldn't be spent staring at a screen.

Benjamin Conlon is a public school teacher and author of *The Slingshot's Secret*, a middle school mystery for anyone trying to find old-fashioned adventure in the digital age. Benjamin grew up in New England and spent much of his childhood exploring the woods surrounding his hometown. After college, he began teaching elementary school. He wrote *The Slingshot's Secret* as a reminder that even in a world filled with technology, adventure abounds.

Scott Walker, who rose to prominence attacking teachers unions, toppled by a former teacher

Gov. Scott Walker was defeated by Tony Evers, the state superintendent of public education.

CASEY QUINLAN NOV 7, 2018, 10:32 AM



RACINE, WI - NOVEMBER 04: DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE FOR WISCONSIN GOVERNOR, TONY EVERS SPEAKS TO SUPPORTERS AT THE RACINE COUNTY DEMOCRATIC OFFICE ON NOVEMBER 4, 2018 IN RACINE, WISCONSIN. (PHOTO BY DARREN HAUCK/GETTY IMAGES)

Tony Evers (D), Wisconsin's state superintendent of public education and a former teacher, won the governor's race against incumbent Scott Walker (R). Walker, who has undermined teachers unions and supported the underfunding of public education in the state throughout this career as governor, recently tried to recast himself as a champion for public schools. Voters didn't buy it.

Walker became governor in 2010, survived a recall effort, and was re-elected in 2014 with 52 percent of the vote. For years, he was considered a rising Republican star.

Walker signed legislation that stripped the majority of Wisconsin's public sector unions of their collective bargaining rights and made it harder for unions to

collect dues and cut education by \$1.2 billion during his first five years as governor. The former resulted in sweeping protests at the state capitol in 2011. Madison schools closed due to teacher sickouts in response to this proposal. He has only recently supported education funding increases, which Evers has approved of, but it still didn't make up for those slashed education budgets.

After Walker's actions maimed teachers unions, 10.5 percent of public school teachers in the state left the teaching profession after the 2010-2011 school year, according to a 2017 Center for American Progress report. That is an increase of 6.4 percent from the previous school year. Teachers in the 2015-2016 school year had less experience than teachers in 2010-2011 school year. Many teachers are also switching districts to receive better pay, hurting rural districts with less resources.

Education was a big priority for voters this election. Twenty-four percent of registered voters said jobs and the economy were the most important issues facing the state, but 22 percent picked K-12 education, according to a Marquette University Law School poll taken in August. Nineteen percent of voters said health care coverage was the most important.

Only 15 percent of voters said schools were in better shape now than they were a few years ago, and 61 percent said they would prefer increased school spending to reduced property taxes. If Evers' emphasis on education wasn't clear enough throughout his campaign speeches and record as an educator, voters would have noticed his campaign vehicle was a yellow school bus.

Walker ran ads featuring teachers and school board members at Three Lakes School District in an attempt to counter his poor long-term record on education funding. In one ad, Wendy, a special education teacher, said "the governor's funding for rural schools has really helped with transportation costs."

But not everyone involved in the ad seemed to be aware of what was going on. The superintendent, George Karling, told the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel that although he knew the governor was visiting the school, he admits he "failed to vet the purpose of the Governor's visit as thoroughly as I should have even though the intent and purpose was expressed to me."

The ad mentioned fabrication laboratories, called Fab Labs, which are high-tech workshops that have 3D printers and laser engravers, for example. They were awarded by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., a public-private agency Walker created.

One of the people featured in the ad, Terry McCloskey, a school board member, said to the Sentinel, "I went over to thank the governor for the budget

this year and for his help and assistance for education and they (the film crew) were doing something on the Fab Lab and I'm a big supporter of the Fab Lab and I got a little carried away and made a bad error."

Walker's overall education spending record has been poor. Adjusting for inflation, the seven budgets before Walker became governor all spent more money on schools than his current budget, according to Politifact.

Evers has supported raising the minimum wage, cutting taxes for the middle class, and spending more on public education and infrastructure. He proposes an increase in school funding of \$1.4 billion over two years. He has also vowed to "take immediate action" to accept federal Medicaid expansion dollars and invest in preventive health programs.

Meanwhile Walker, who has strongly opposed the Affordable Care Act for a long time, said in February that he wanted to support the ACA market with a \$200 million program compensating health insurers for high-cost patients. Days before the election, Walker said he wanted the "exact same language" on pre-existing conditions protections in the ACA to be enacted on the state level. Walker definitely isn't the only Republican to make last-minute displays of support for coverage of pre-existing conditions. Walker has repeatedly refused federal funding for Medicaid expansion.

Walker's Foxconn debacle also may have hurt him in the governor's race. He said that \$3 billion in state subsidies was worth a \$10 billion investment from the company to build a facility making television screens, which he claimed would bring tens of thousands of jobs. Foxconn later said the plans had changed and in the short term, only 3,000 workers would be hired. The costs of the deal for the state increased. Environmental groups had concerns about the project.

Betsy DeVos' staff denies rumor she's leaving education secretary job

Todd Spangler, Detroit Free Press Published 12:53 p.m. ET Nov. 12, 2018 | Updated 5:03 p.m. ET Nov. 12, 2018



(Photo: SAUL LOEB, AFP/Getty Images)
CONNECTTWEETLINKEDINCOMMENTEMAILMORE

WASHINGTON – Education Secretary Betsy DeVos says she's not going anywhere with Democrats taking control of the U.S. House in January, despite rumors to the contrary.

But if she stays, her life is almost certainly going to get a whole lot tougher.

On Monday, in response to a question about rumors circulating that DeVos, a Michigan billionaire, Republican backer and former school-choice advocate in the state, might be looking at stepping down, her press secretary, Liz Hill, knocked down the suggestions.

"The rumors are just that ... rumors," Hill wrote in an email to the Free Press. "The Secretary has no plans of stepping down."

There is almost universal agreement, however, that DeVos — who has made only rare appearances on Capitol Hill to testify with Republicans in charge of both chambers of Congress — is going to be asked a lot more questions in the future.

It also means that departmental policies on issues such as civil rights, school choice, sexual assault investigations, transgender students' access to bathrooms and student loan repayment are all going to come under close scrutiny.

And if a Democratic-led U.S. House doesn't have the power to force the Senate to enact changes, it can — and likely will — try to force that chamber's hand on votes and repeatedly call DeVos before key committees to question her.

"The Democratic House has made clear that it will be energetic about oversight," said Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a research organization in Washington, D.C. "That may mean healthy,

appropriate scrutiny of department business or organized harassment intended to make it harder for DeVos and her team to do their jobs. Which it is will tell us a lot about the priorities of the the Democratic majority and how Dems hope to position themselves for 2020.”

Educators' unions are already looking forward to the change: A day after the midterm elections last week, the National Education Association put out a statement saying the shift "will serve as an important check on President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos." And the American Federation for Teachers said Monday it is "hopeful that in a Democratic House, (expected new chairman U.S. Rep.) Bobby Scott's committee can now exercise oversight over Betsy DeVos' agenda."

The publication Education Week noted that a Democratic takeover of the House Committee on Education and Workforce means "increased oversight of U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos."

DeVos — a philanthropist and state party official who had no education background when Trump nominated her — has been controversial in the office since day one. She was confirmed in February 2017 on a tie-breaking vote in the Senate by Vice President Mike Pence.

Besides pushing school choice proposals, she has criticized efforts to provide additional funding to underperforming schools; proposed rules that would decrease the number of investigations into allegations of sexual harassment and assault, and said she wouldn't stand in the way of school districts using federal funds to purchase firearms for protection.

She was also roundly criticized for flubbing a question on CBS's "60 Minutes" when she said she had no idea whether Michigan's schools were better or worse off because of her school choice efforts. During her confirmation hearing, she was also drubbed for seeming to not know details about some programs and for suggesting — jokingly — that some districts might need access for firearms to protect them from grizzly bears.

She has been a focal point of anger against the Trump administration since taking office, as well, and for her security detail, which is expected to cost some \$8 million in the next year.

DeVos, however, has earned praise — including from those who believe that changes in sexual assault investigation policies will provide more of a balance to the rights of the accused.

Writing for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education research organization in Washington, President Michael Petrilli said DeVos overcame a bumpy start and

"grew into the role as secretary." The question is whether she decides to stay and face a Democratic House certain to hold her to a different standard.

"The question facing Secretary DeVos is whether to participate in these show trials," he wrote last week. "She has another option. ... She can choose to step down and gracefully exit a thankless, no-win scene."

Petrilli went on to say she should do so, arguing it will "take some wind" out of Democrats' attacks and deny teachers unions a talking point headed into the next Congress and the 2020 election.

Contact Todd Spangler: 703-854-8947 or tspangler@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@tsspangler](https://twitter.com/tsspangler).

• No Child Left Behind

EDUCATION PLUS DEVELOPMENT

Beyond the midterms: Helping students overcome the impact of No Child Left Behind

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek & Laurence Steinberg

Wednesday, November 21, 2018

The midterms are behind us. No, not the elections, but the midterm exams that have been a staple of college syllabi for decades. That's when students sharpen their virtual pencils, review the yellow highlights in articles and books they've read, and attempt to offer cogent, well-written, analytical, and targeted essays.

Each of us has been teaching and grading undergraduates for more than 35 years. We each use a structure for midterm exams in which we distribute a series of questions well in advance of the test day. Students are told that the test will include a subset of these questions. No surprises. This should be comforting, because with adequate preparation, everyone can get a good grade.

We have been using this midterm format for decades. In the past few years, however, something has seemed dramatically different. When they spoke in class, our students were just as knowledgeable as their counterparts a decade ago—perhaps even more so. But the mere thought of a written exam created palpable fear in our classrooms.

Students told us that even with lead time, the task of defending a thesis developed from several sources and numerous class discussions was a herculean challenge. And for good reason: According to the most recent nationwide assessment of American high school seniors' writing skills, in 2011, only one in four can construct an essay that is coherent and well-structured, with ideas presented clearly, logically, and effectively. Writing had been periodically assessed prior to 2011; the proportion of 17-year-olds classified as "proficient" had not significantly improved since 1998. This year, ACT scores showed similar stagnancy. Indeed, students did worse on all college-ready benchmarks, including measures of reading, writing, math, and science.

International comparisons reveal that American students are not as strong as others at defending arguments or critically evaluating a text. Their Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in critical reading hover around the international average, placing the U.S. 24th among participating countries—behind Singapore, Canada, Slovenia, and the U.K. American students perform at PISA's level three competency, where readers can: "recognize the relationship between several pieces of information...integrate several parts of a text to identify the main idea...take into account many features in comparing, contrasting, or categorizing...and reflect on a text in relation to familiar everyday knowledge." However, they have difficulty when asked to "use formal or public knowledge to hypothesize about or critically evaluate a text." The 2018 version of the test intends to ask whether students can go beyond retrieving the facts to evaluating the veracity of the texts, and integrating and synthesizing information in ways that allow new ideas to surface. Our prediction is that American students will fare poorly on this assessment.

When we asked colleagues across the country if they too had noted that their students had trouble writing, they uniformly said, "yes." One professor, from a high-ranking state university, told us that this semester she deviated from her syllabus to take two full days to review the idea of a topic sentence and to help her students better understand how to marshal evidence to support the claims made in their statements. Another, from a highly ranked private college, wrote in a recent Facebook post that he took time out of his class to explain how to write, noting that his students had no idea what they did not know.

WHAT IS GOING ON? WHY ARE TODAY'S COLLEGE JUNIORS SO ILL-PREPARED FOR ESSAY EXAMS?

Here's a thought: Today's juniors in college are the first cohort of students who spent their entire public education under the educational reform law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

In January of 2002, No Child Left Behind became the law of the land. Signed by George W. Bush, and with rare bipartisan support, the law offered a fresh and well-intended response to our failing education system. Americans had been warned in 1975 that we were a “Nation at Risk” and that the demise of our public schools was akin to an “act of war.” Something had to be done. NCLB created sweeping reforms that would leave an indelible mark on teachers and students alike. It promised to refashion education, with a sharp focus on reading and mathematics and little time for extras like social studies, physical education, music, or recess. And it would elevate the need for accountability by testing students regularly and publicizing schools’ performance.

We agree that children are likely to learn more when they are tested on their knowledge—hence our own midterm exams. Scientific research strongly suggests that testing helps students learn. Yet, for this to be the case, it is important to give the right kind of tests. Those adopted by the states in response to NCLB were largely fill-in-the-blank, one-right-answer tests that never asked students to defend a position or to find different pathways to come to a defensible conclusion. In fact, many contend that NCLB, and to some extent the testing craze that has continued under the implementation of the Common Core, is the antithesis of the active learning approach that has been endorsed repeatedly by those who study the science of learning. A flurry of books raised these concerns in the hope that education would become more than teaching to the test. That was largely not to be. And so, we college professors have inherited a cohort of students whose writing skills have left them behind students in other parts of the developed world. The business community requires that America have a modern workforce equipped with 21st century skills like collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creative innovation. But America’s students are being trained to parrot answers in a fashion that allows them—and their schools—to thrive in the NCLB culture.

Our students are, not surprisingly, very good at memorizing and regurgitating small bits of information—as far as we can discern, they are better at this than past cohorts. But that skill won’t be enough to succeed in the workplace of the future. In order for that to happen, our elementary and secondary schools need to make sure that students learn how to think. While teaching facts and rules are critical, sheer memorization is no longer as important as it once was. Students can access facts at their fingertips, retrieving millions of hits in fractions of a second. We must teach our students how to think critically about these facts and write in a way that reflects this skill. Only then will they be ready for the college classrooms of today and the workplaces of tomorrow.



Exterior House Painting

Todd Banaszak

Clarence Middle School

Physical Education Teacher

25 years of Experience

553-0302

Painting

(trim, siding, shake shingle, stucco etc..)

Staining Cedar

Pressure Washing

Deck Refinishing

Fence Refinishing

- No job is too small.
- Many references, East Amherst and Clarence
- Professional crew with many years of experience.
- Complete customer satisfaction.

Call or text for a free estimate.

716-553-0302

MATT STASIAK GOLF

Looking to improve your golf game? Contact Matt Stasiak today. Matt brings over 20 years of experience to his teaching.

If you want to play your best, then you need to learn from the best!

For more information on lessons visit mattstasiakgolf.com.

Or, give Matt a call at 716-829-9027.

