

CHEATING, TIME, AND ABILITY

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Every once in a rare while, something happens in the education arena that gives one a quavering glimmer of hope for the future. One such occurrence was reported in mid-August by the *New York Sun*. Staffer Elizabeth Green tracked down rumblings of discontent from students—admittedly few in number—in New York private schools who are protesting the two-decades old SAT policy that allows students with certified learning disabilities to take the test without time limits.

I opposed this policy vehemently from the outset. This is not to say that accommodations should not be made for the genuinely physically disabled (the blind, the lame, etc.). However, I had already observed what I considered the abuse of the amorphous category of learning disability. That abuse, I believed, would only be exacerbated by the SAT's untimed test option.

The rebel students in New York faced that abuse head on. At one elite private school, when the test proctor asked the untimed students in line to step aside, "half . . . stepped out of line—and . . . no one batted an eye," according to a 'non-learning-disabled' student at the school.

The lack of embarrassment is striking. Yet, I have seen it first hand. For example, I have had teacher colleagues, who were stentorian in their decrying of the laxness of our schools, fall all over themselves to have their own children labeled learning-disabled and think nothing of it. In addition, I once had a student in a private school come up to me and proudly declare that he was learning-disabled and would be exempt from the foreign language requirement. I told him that as far as I was concerned, no student is learning-disabled, but he was feeling too good about his debility to hear.

This represents an abuse—taken to an unprecedented degree—of good intentions. Unfortunately, such abuse is not atypical. In affluent school districts in Los Angeles, New York City, and Connecticut, half the students have been classified as learning-disabled for test-taking purposes. These students have been diagnosed with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) or some other equally deadly, but acronymically fashionable, malady.

At least, until four years ago (October 2003), students who took the test untimed had their scores flagged with an asterisk. However, that practice was challenged in the courts as discriminatory. The courts upheld the challenge, so the asterisk has vanished, and an untimed score is indistinguishable from a timed score. Furthermore, the SAT consistently has refused to disclose income statistics for families of untimed students.

Clearly, the balance is tipped in favor of those who can afford to be disabled. The obvious losers are the disadvantaged poor. The less obvious losers are affluent students who game the system in this way.

Behind their blithe gaming of the system is the indulgent culture of self-esteem that has infected our schools during the last generation. The self-esteem ethic has created a massive sense of free-ride entitlement that allows our students to feel good about themselves for no reason, imperviously to reality.

Florida State University Professor Roy Baumeister and his team of co-researchers—in a presentation to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) that was summarized on the university's web site—observed:

Once schools started self-esteem programs . . . they developed a momentum on their own, partly because the exercises—for example, going around the room and letting everybody say what is special about himself or herself—feel good Certainly, it is a more enjoyable way . . . than, say, doing math or spelling drills.

The Baumeister team observed further that "self-esteem programs . . . seek to boost everyone's self-esteem without demanding appropriate behavior first."

The products of such empty exercises are feel-good failures. There has been proof enough of that—if only people would notice—in California. In 1986, state legislator John Vasconcellos spearheaded the formation of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. Vasconcello's goal was to reduce, possibly to cure, society's ills. The plan has failed miserably. California's schools are worse than before.

So too will all America's schools be, unless we jettison the worship of self-esteem that has turned out to be, not only not a cure, but even a cause of further sickness. We have succeeded only in producing vast numbers of what Socrates described as those who happily believe themselves to know while actually they know nothing.

The students who are rebelling against the SAT policy are rebelling, as far as I can tell, against what they perceive as a personal injustice. The question is whether—as they mature—they will realize that it is actually a systemic and societal injustice, and whether—if they do—they will lead a more important rebellion to purge the system and society of injustice at all levels.

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