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OPINION | OTHER THOUGHTS

Are U.S. Students Falling Behind?

LOS ANGELES TIMES (Dec. 9): The standardized tests known as the Program for International Student Assessment are considered so important that when the latest results were released last week, the U.S. Department of Education participated in a so-called PISA Day. The leaders of the nation's teachers unions immediately fired off news releases asserting that the mediocre PISA scores of American students showed that more than a decade of testing-based reform had failed our schools. Prominent reform leaders, by contrast, concluded from the test results that the U.S. was failing to change schools radically enough to aid its most disadvantaged students. Still others predicted that the U.S. economy would crash and burn because of our students' unimpressive math scores on the PISA exams compared with other countries' students. (American students ranked above the median in reading and science but below it in math.)

A saner interpretation of the PISA results came from researchers who have studied international rankings in great detail, and their message goes something like this: Calm down, everyone. The results on this and other international tests are more complicated than they look, and in this case, nuance makes a difference. Despite the doomsday talk, the scores a country receives on the PISA don't necessarily predict the strength — or weakness — of its future labor force or the trajectory of its economy, according to Martin Carnoy, a professor of education at Stanford University. Some countries with relatively low scores have built thriving, tech-based economies, while the economies of some high-scoring nations have faltered.

And the results on the PISA, administered every three years to 15-year-olds in 65 countries, tell us as much about cultural differences as about differences between school systems. In the Asian countries that took the top spots — including Singapore, South Korea and areas of China — families spend heavily on private tutoring to prepare their children for college entrance examinations that closely resemble the PISA tests, Carnoy said. So the high PISA results don't necessarily reflect on their schools.

The reasons that some countries do well (or poorly) are complicated. Finland, for instance, has historically been successful on the PISA tests — so much so that governments, including California's, have sent delegations there to figure out the educational magic. And Finland has been successful despite the fact that, unlike in Asia, testing is de-emphasized and recesses during the school day are long. But Finland also is a country with relatively few disadvantaged children, largely because of the nation's social welfare network. And disadvantaged children, no matter what the country, fare worse on the PISA tests than students from more educated and affluent families. A Stanford study last year found that non-school factors such as the number of books in students' homes accounted for more than two-thirds of the variation in scores on high-profile international tests like PISA.

A study published this year by Carnoy and Richard Rothstein, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute, found that much of the difference between U.S. scores and those of high-ranking nations is because the United States has a higher proportion of disadvantaged students. But the researchers found that the scores of the most disadvantaged U.S. students have been improving markedly over the years, while scores for their counterparts in many top-ranked nations have fallen precipitously.

In contrast, the highest-scoring U.S. math students are nowhere near their peers in top-ranking countries, Carnoy said.

Though curriculum itself isn't a cure-all, the Common Core curriculum, which California and dozens of other states are beginning to implement, should help. It is more closely aligned to the kind of conceptual understanding and deep thinking that is both called for on the PISA tests and required for true innovation.

If there is a lesson to be gleaned from PISA, it's that moving toward a more educated nation will require helping families give their children the resources and background they need to do better in school, as well as continuing reform efforts to improve instruction and curriculum. It requires committed action over time, not warring and self-serving pronouncements.

THE VIEWS PAGE

The **PRESS & DAKOTAN** Views page provides a forum for open discussion of issues and interests affecting our readers. Initialed editorials represent the opinion of the writer, but not necessarily that of the **PRESS & DAKOTAN**. Bylined columns represent the view of the author. We welcome letters to the editor on current topics. Questions regarding the Views page should be directed to Kelly Hertz at views@yankton.net.

ON THIS DATE

By The Associated Press
Today is Thursday, Dec. 12, the 346th day of 2013. There are 19 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Dec. 12, 2000, George W. Bush was transformed into the president-elect as a divided U.S. Supreme Court reversed a state court decision for recounts in Florida's contested election.

On this date: In 1787, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first black lawmaker sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1897, "The Katzenjammer Kids," the pioneering comic strip created by Rudolph Dirks, made its debut in the *New York Journal*.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt nominated Oscar Straus to be Secretary of Commerce and Labor; Straus became the first Jewish Cabinet member.

In 1911, Britain's King George V announced during a visit to India that the capital would be transferred from Calcutta to Delhi.

In 1917, Father Edward Flanagan founded Boys Town outside Omaha, Neb.

In 1925, the first motel — the Motel Inn — opened in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

In 1937, Japanese aircraft sank the U.S. gunboat *Panay* on China's Yangtze River. (Japan apologized, and paid \$2.2 million in reparations.)

In 1946, a United Nations committee voted to accept a six-block tract of Manhattan real estate offered as a gift by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to be the site of the U.N.'s headquarters.

In 1963, Kenya gained its independence from Britain.

In 1972, Irwin Allen's all-star disaster movie "The Poseidon Adventure" was released.

In 1985, 248 American soldiers and eight crew members were killed when an Arrow Air charter crashed after takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland.

Ten years ago: Paul Martin succeeded Jean Chretien as Canada's prime minister. Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger was knighted by

Britain. Keiko, the killer whale made famous by the "Free Willy" movies, died in the Norwegian fjord that he'd made his home.

Five years ago: A bomb exploded inside the West Coast Bank in Woodburn, Ore., killing Woodburn Police Capt. Thomas Tennant and Oregon State Police Senior Trooper William Hakim. Actor Van Johnson died in Nyack, N.Y. at age 92.

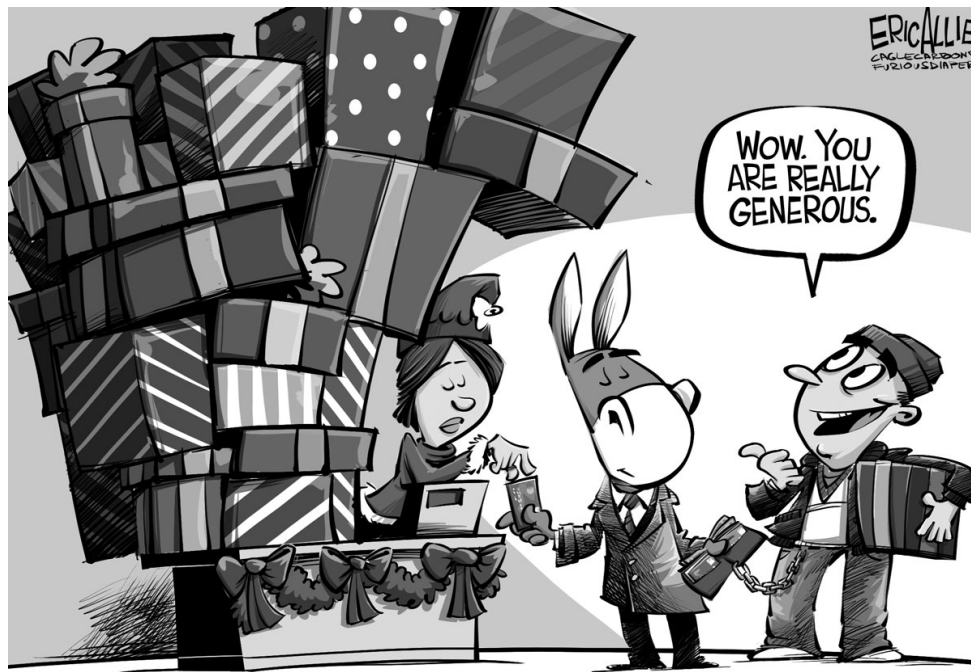
One year ago: Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said uncertainty over the possible effects of automatic tax hikes and spending cuts scheduled to take effect the following month were adversely affecting consumer and business confidence. Pedro Hernandez, charged with killing a 6-year-old New York City boy, pleaded not guilty to murder, even though police said he had confessed to killing Etan Patz, who disappeared as he walked to the bus stop on his way to school in 1979.

Today's Birthdays: Former TV host Bob Barker is 90. Basketball Hall of Famer Bob Pettit is 81. Singer Connie Francis is 76. Singer Dionne Warwick is 73. Rock singer-musician Dickey Betts is 70. Former race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi is 67. Actor Wings Hauser is 66. Actor Bill Nighy is 64. Actor Duane Chase (Film: "The Sound of Music") is 63. Country singer LaCosta is 63. Gymnast-turned-actress Cathy Rigby is 61. Author Lorna Landvik is 59. Singer-musician Sheila E. is 56. Actress Sheree J. Wilson is 55. Pop singer Daniel O'Donnell is 52. International Tennis Hall of Famer Tracy Austin is 51. Rock musician Eric Schenkman (Spin Doctors) is 50. Rock musician Nicholas Dimichino (Nine Days) is 46. Author Sophie Kinsella is 44. News anchor Maggie Rodriguez is 44. Actress Jennifer Connelly is 43. Actress Madchen Amick is 43. Actress Regina Hall is 43. Country singer Hank Williams III is 41. Actress Mayim Bialik is 38. Model Bridget Hall is 36.

Thought for Today: "I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who died from doubt." — Charles Horace Mayo, American surgeon and co-founder of the Mayo Clinic (1865-1939).

FROM THE BIBLE

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Proverbs 9:10. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis



Make A Girl Laugh

BY KATHLEEN PARKER
© 2013, Washington Post Writers Group

WASHINGTON — Make a woman laugh, Marilyn Monroe supposedly said, and you can make her do anything.

Judging from the women who fell for him, Woody Allen learned this early. Alas, he is the least likely role model for Republican males, who seem to have misinterpreted the meaning of the aphorism.

To clarify: The idea is to make a girl laugh by engaging your wit, not to make her laugh at you.

As Republican leaders recently began tutoring their male candidates on "How to Talk to a Lady" (my title), it was tempting to imagine what wisdom was being imparted. A few ideas:

"Whatever you do, do not mention the V-word."

"Steer clear of 'legitimate rape.' All rape is illegitimate. Whatever."

"No matter what, avoid voicing thoughts such as, 'This gal is probably not a candidate for Lululemon yoga pants.'"

I was unable to secure confirmation on any of the above despite investigative emails. The absence of transparency, of course, leads to rampant speculation. And, alas, mockery. Even though well-intended and much-needed, the idea that men should get coaching on how to talk to women so as not to offend them is sort of 1950s prep school-ish, as have been some of the suggestions directed their way.

"You have to connect with women on an emotional level," said Mark Jacobs, Republican Senate candidate from Iowa, when a television interviewer asked him what the biggest difference is between men and women. "And with a wife of 25 years and an 18-year-old daughter, I've had a lot of coaching on that," Jacobs continued.

There you go! See how simple? In more speculation:

"Madam Senator, I know it must be really hard to juggle your duties here with all the hormonal activity of a seasoned woman such as yourself — and I say that with great compassion because, you know, I have a wife, too. Hoo-boy, do I ever! Just kidding. Sorry, Freudian boxers! Heh-heh-heh. Hey, I thought they said you gals like to laugh?!"

All kidding aside, the real reason for these tutoring sessions is to ensure that incumbent Republicans, especially those who face female opponents, don't commit any unforced errors on issues important to women. In recent years, women have been stampeding the other

way like a herd of Gallinimus evading a T. rex or, in this case, a T. Akin, as in Todd, the former Missouri congressman who helpfully defined "legitimate rape."

If I may: Gentlemen, one should connect with women emotionally in the privacy of one's own home. At work, you can talk to a woman just as you talk to a guy, assuming you're communicating about work-related issues. If you are confused about this, you should assume the fetal curl in the privacy of your therapist's office.

The truth is, Democrats have engaged in such training, too. Notably, Joe Biden was coached about how to deal with Sarah Palin during the 2008 vice presidential debate: gently, kindly and without condescension or even a tiny hint of bullying. Biden performed admirably, flashing his million-buck smile without betraying his certain interior bafflement.

Further to truth, except for the occasional nitwit, the Republican Party is not anti-woman despite exhaustive messaging from the left. Yes, they are pro-life, but this is hardly a ridiculous position. Unfortunately, as a society, we've stopped thinking about life beyond that which pertains immediately and pleasurable to our own gratification.

What is ridiculous is Republicans' incompetence in communicating their case. My advice would be to stop trying. Paul Ryan is pro-life, but you don't hear him yakking about it.

The GOP is not helped by such characters as Rush Limbaugh, whom the White House brilliantly tagged as leader of the party and who may be the single greatest obstacle to attracting women. His latest insult among many was advice to women concerned with sexual harassment: "Please ask your breasts to stop staring at my eyes."

Are you laughing yet, ladies? Didn't think so.

Rather than tutor men about how to talk to women, Republicans might do better to recruit some of their own smartest women to public service. The boys might discover that women, rather than looking for a man to handle things, just want to get stuff done. One does fear, however, that once these freshly counseled gents witness intelligent, conservative women committing government, they might swoon from the shock of revelation and, you know, try to connect emotionally.

Kathleen Parker's email address is kathleenparker@washpost.com.



Kathleen PARKER

Writer's Block | Loretta Sorensen

Giving Inner Peace A Chance

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

After moving my office to my home this summer, I discovered something new about myself: over the eight years I leased an office, I had grown very accustomed to spending the majority of my day by myself. I didn't realize how much I appreciated the solitude that isolated hangout provided.

It's not that the pace in our home is necessarily hectic, at least not all the time. It's just that I no longer deal with just my own racket and busyness now. Often, there are two phones ringing, twice as many papers rattling and more than just my digital media humming throughout the morning and afternoon. And there's no door I can use to shut out any untimely din.

The interesting thing is that, while my physical surroundings may not be quite as wonderfully quiet as they were in that office, I'm finding I have much more internal serenity.

Depending on my schedule for the day, it takes about one minute to reach my desk after I finish breakfast. There's neither wild nor pokey traffic to navigate, no road construction to brave, no wrestling matches with tricky office doors. No need for concerns about frosty windshields or chilling winter blasts at the end of a taxing day, either.

No standing in line for lunch. And if I have to work a bit late, the comfort of the couch is just a couple paces beyond the office chair instead of 20 minutes down the road.



Loretta SORENSEN

Without a doubt, the privacy I enjoyed in a formal office setting for the past eight years is history. I can't imagine ever establishing an office outside my home again. But the new atmosphere I'm growing accustomed to now isn't all that bad.

The adjustments I've worked through in past weeks caused me to spend considerable time reflecting on just how I define peace.

It used to trouble me considerably to hear someone say, "Peace comes from within." I readily chafed at the idea that I could possibly be responsible for my own serenity. Many external things rocked my "peace" boat.

However, with time, I've begun to see that true peace does come from inside, originating in the soul. Like it or not, I choose every day whether or not to experience that elusive, restful calm. Contentment may be ruffled by circumstances, but cannot solely be governed by events or people.

I doubt this is the last time I'll readjust my definition of "peace and quiet." Most likely, in this world, I'll experience only a measure of deep peace at any given time. External circumstances will probably continue testing the extent of my resolve to manage my "peace within." It's realistic to think I'll see an occasional fracture or two in that well of tranquility. Still, I believe I've sharpened my understanding of genuine peace. I need to tuck that pleasing revelation in the back of my mind now, and trust that I'll be able to find it when I have a need for it again.

YOUR LETTERS

The Beauty Of 'Beauty'

Dorota Dannenbring, Yankton
The Academy of Dance
The Academy of Dance would like to thank all the dancers, parents, volunteers, sponsors (both individuals and businesses) and the great audiences for making the Sleeping Beauty Ballet such a great success. Because of your encouragement and support the youth of the Yankton area were able to publically show

their amazing talents.
Thank you also to the *Press & Dakotan* and Kelly Hertz for their coverage and hundreds of beautiful pictures on "Spotted" and capturing the beauty of ballet on stage.
A final thank you to everyone who was involved in the production and we look forward to an even, bigger, better production of "Sleeping Beauty Ballet" in 2015.
Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!