

## OTHER VIEWS

# Stop blaming teachers for state's ills

By NANCY P. WYMER

I WRITE with great frustration at the way current and former public officials and media pundits blame public school teachers, especially in the Abbott districts, for the "failure" of public schools.

Those people don't focus on the underlying societal causes of these "failures" — systemic poverty, substandard housing, persistently high unemployment, rampant violence, gangs, crime, drugs, not to mention a culture that tolerates multiple teen pregnancies, turns a blind eye to parental neglect and ignores family dysfunction — because the remedies would be difficult and expensive.

They'd rather blame teachers: those "incompetent, overpaid" public school teachers who are taking our money while state test scores remain low. Blame the teachers, and tie their salaries to the students' test scores.

Is that the way to attract highly qualified teachers to these public schools?

They say: We need non-public school vouchers, public/private charter schools and academies where the "good" students can go to escape those "failing" public schools. In time, they say, we can close those "failing" schools, re-open them as charter schools, with longer school days and longer school years and then we can re-hire the teachers — at a much lower salary, no job protection, no tenure, no pension and no bargaining rights.

Is that the best way to balance the budget?

Before everybody jumps on this bandwagon, consider:

If you take "good" students, those who are academically attuned, ambitious and inquisitive, out of our schools to fill your charter/parochial schools and public academies, whom are you leaving behind?

Leave aside those students who can be discipline problems, those with parents who can't control them, whose families can't or won't participate in their education. They don't even get in the door. A quarter of the student population in my high school is classified. Where are charter schools' mainstreamed inclusion students? Their special education students? Their bilingual, ESL and Limited English Proficiency students?

**Charter schools and public academies rob us of academically attuned youngsters.**

These children must still be educated, so where do they go? Back to the traditional public schools. Public vocational-technical high schools that have re-made themselves into academies: These schools were originally designed to teach students from all backgrounds trade skills. No more. Now they are elite academies with expensive science equipment pharmaceutical companies only dream about. (Bergen Academies, anyone?)

## Transient students

Where are their transient immigrant students whose parents take them "back to their country" for six to eight weeks in the winter season, returning just in time for the state HSPA tests?

I'll tell you where — back in the traditional public schools. To those special schools, No Child Left Behind is just a slogan; mandatory state tests and sanctions inflicted on the rest of us are optional.

Exactly what are the entrance criteria for these schools?

Public academies and public charter schools: While some schools (like Newark's Robert Treat Academy) hold lotteries to randomly select their students, they only accommodate a certain number of students. Students don't just wear uniforms; they are required to attend Saturday morning classes, af-

ter- and before-school classes. If the students don't comply with the school's strict academic and behavior policies, they may be asked to leave.

Their parents are required to attend school events, conferences and meetings. If they don't participate to the satisfaction of those running these schools, their children, again, may be asked to leave.

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into academies: These schools were originally designed to teach students from all backgrounds trade skills. No more. Now they are elite academies with expensive science equipment pharmaceutical companies only dream about. (Bergen Academies, anyone?)

A limited number of students are accepted from the entire county, with the sending school district paying the tuition. The student/teacher ratio is small. Students' grammar school transcripts are scrutinized, because, let's face it, these academies are selective.

Parents have to sign contracts regarding student behavior and achievement, as well as parental support and participation. If the students (or their parents) don't hold up their end of the contract, the students return to the sending school.

Does the tuition money sent with these children from the public schools at the start of the year re-

turn to the public school along with the child, or does it remain with the charter school?

Charter schools and public academies are not a prescription to cure the problems of urban schools. Instead, they exacerbate the situation by robbing us of academically attuned youngsters, with educated and involved parents who truly make a difference in their children's academic success.

## Stop the criticism

Governor Christie: Please pause before you make more disparaging remarks about me and my colleagues who have dedicated years to the children of the cities, before you threaten us with the loss of our jobs because you think we aren't working hard enough, before you declare us failures and embrace charter schools and voucher programs as your budget-balancing solutions.

When charter schools, non-public schools and public academies enroll (and retain) all applicants despite their skill level, language barrier or special classification, when they adhere to the whims and vagaries of state and federal regulators, when they adjust their entrance criteria so that *all* students can attend their schools, no matter what family or community support they receive, when they truly embrace No Child Left Behind, then, and only then, can we talk honestly and constructively about fixing what's wrong with our urban public schools.

That's a conversation that is long overdue.

Nancy P. Wymer of Hackensack has taught English, drama and public speaking at John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson for 26 years.

# Keep Bergen blue

Revoking shopping ban would be a blow to residents

By KERI ANN FLACCOMIO

IT'S A Saturday afternoon. A busy week is behind me, and now I'm looking for some rest and relaxation before Monday begins another rigorous cycle. I get in my car, open the windows and set off on a drive down Route 17 through Paramus.

My destination? The AMC movie theater attached to the Garden State Plaza — one of three major shopping malls in town. The trip spans less than three miles, but the drive takes more than 30 minutes. The traffic is wall-to-wall and I am surrounded by idling vehicles; I have to close the windows to keep the smell of gas from nauseating me.

As I check my watch, it becomes evident that I'll be missing more than just the previews at this movie showing.

Finally I give up and put on my signal light, making my way to the nearest exit. Instead of making a U-turn I decide to take the back roads home.

This is a typical Saturday in Paramus, one of the largest retail markets in America.

Governor Chris Christie recently suggested that Bergen County's "blue laws" that ban most business on Sundays be repealed.

Revoking this policy would be a blow to the residents of Bergen County. Week after week we put up with stop-and-go traffic from Monday through Saturday; we find shortcuts and alternate routes to travel on in order to avoid the congestion on the main roads.

Shoppers pour in from all over the tri-state area looking for bargain prices and taking advantage of the state's lack of sales tax on clothing. Sunday is the one day during which Bergen County residents can move freely along the roads. On Sunday people can get around town in a reasonable amount of time.

## Quality of life

Repealing the blue laws would meet the needs of outside shoppers, but would cost local residents in their quality of life.

According to The Record, "The [Paramus] borough's Police Department estimates 250,000 people occupy the borough during business hours — more than eight times larger than its population of 30,000."

With this kind of traffic, if the blue laws are rescinded, we can expect to see an increase in pollution from carbon monoxide given off by idling passenger cars and de-

livery trucks flooding our main roads.

A potential for increased crime and shoplifting may exist, and there would need to be overtime pay for police officers who provide security at popular retail locations.

And who is going to pay for the road maintenance? We are.

In addition, allowing regular business to run in Bergen County on Sunday would more likely require current employees to work an extra day, rather than create new job opportunities.

For people who work full time six days a week, Sunday is a day to rest from their labor and to spend time with their families and friends.

## Peace and quiet

As local residents, we ask for one day of peace, quiet and physical rest. People who want to shop on Sunday can do so in plenty of areas close to, but outside, Bergen County. The Palisades Center is just one example of such a retail location.

Furthermore, many question the claim that Sunday business will increase sales tax revenue by \$65 million, feeling that the numbers just don't add up. Bergen County residents have gone for years without buying certain items on Sundays, and they don't mind continuing to do so to protect their peace of mind.

Shoppers will make their intended purchases when stores are open, whether that means keeping them open six days out of the week or seven. One extra day of business will not necessarily attract more shoppers — more likely it will spread out the trips and purchases of current shoppers.

Opponents of the blue laws say that people who don't want to put up with heavy traffic shouldn't live in Bergen County.

But I wasn't born when my parents bought a house in Paramus 24 years ago, so I don't think it's fair that I should have to sit in a gridlock every time I want to see a movie, visit a friend, pick up a book or simply go for a drive.

As a Bergen County resident, I can deal with the congestion Monday through Saturday, but I refuse to give up the one day of open roads and clear air that we have left.

Keri Ann Flaccomio, a communications major at Ramapo College, lives in Paramus. Send comments about this column to Peter Grad, Op-Ed Page editor, at grad@northjersey.com.



# The role of librarians in the age of Google

By SARA SCRIBNER

THE CURRENT generation of kindergartners to 12th graders — those born between 1991 and 2004 — has no memory of a time before Google. But although these students are far more tech savvy than their parents and are perpetually connected to the Internet, they know a lot less than they think. And worse, they don't know what they don't know.

As a librarian I teach students research skills. But I've just been pink-slipped, along with five other middle-school and high-school librarians, and only a parcel tax here in Pasadena, Calif., on the city's May ballot can save the district's libraries.

Closing libraries is always a bad idea, but for the Google generation, it could be disastrous. In a time when information literacy is increasingly crucial to life and work, not teaching kids how to search for information is like sending them out into the world without knowing how to read.

Instead of simply navigating books and the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature — an annual index of magazine and newspaper articles used in the olden days — today's students sift through an infinite number of options: books, Internet sources, academic databases. Much of the time they opt for Google, which is like being tossed into the ocean without a paddle.

An info-literate student can find the right bit of information amid the sea of irrelevance and misinformation. But any college librarian will tell you that freshman research skills are absolutely abysmal. Before they graduate from high school, students need to be able to understand the phenomenal number

of information options at their fingertips, learn how to work with non-Google-style search queries, avoid plagiarism and judge whether the facts before them were culled by an expert in the field or tossed off by a crackpot in the basement.

## A closer look

As even struggling school districts manage to place computers in classrooms, it's difficult to find a child without Internet access. But look closer at what happens when students undertake an academic task as simple as researching global warming — tens of millions of hits on Google — and it becomes clear that the so-called divide is not digital but informational. It's not about access; it's about agility.

Most children consider a computer search second nature, so trying to give them instruction or advice can be difficult. Recently, noticing that a sixth-grader didn't know how to search the school library catalog, I tried to show him the steps. "You don't need to tell me," he said, clearly insulted. "I know how to use a computer!"

It is especially shocking when students attempt to tap into the library's catalog system by entering a book search on Amazon or searching the Web site for Accelerated Reader's BookFinder (an online database that contains every book included in the Accelerated Reader program). They sometimes don't understand that these are discrete sites and systems. For them, the Internet is one big amorphous information universe.

And to most kids, whatever they read on the Internet is "all good." I've been told, quite emphatically, that the Apollo moonwalk never happened, the Holocaust was a hoax and George W. Bush orchestrated Sept. 11 — all based on text, photos or videos found online.

Although students might be able to hack through a school's video-game blocking devices, they have trouble formulating successful search queries and making sense of what they find. This needs to be taught — again and again and again, in different grades and in different ways.



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Librarians can show students how to judge a Web site and how to avoid landing on bogus ones. We can also train them to come up with the kind of precision search terms that could save them hours of sorting through a heap of useless hits.

To research global warming, for example, I'd suggest an academic database such as ProQuest's eLibrary or SIRS Researcher, which have age-appropriate content. Or I'd steer students to reliable Internet sources from library subscription sites such as Britannica Online, which are vetted by experts. I could also teach them to use Google's advanced features.

## Information literacy

Instead of laying off librarians, we should be studying how children think about information and technology. We need professionals to advocate for teaching information literacy from an early age.

We need librarians to love books — to inspire kids to turn off the screen sometimes and get caught up in a story — but we also need them to train students to manipulate search engines and databases, to think about them in a fresh way.

Instead of closing library doors, we need to give librarians the time to teach what they know: basic research survival skills that are as important as reading, writing and math. If we don't teach our kids to take charge of information, they will get swept aside by it.

Sara Scribner is a librarian at Blair International Baccalaureate School, a public middle and high school in Pasadena, Calif. Send comments about this column to grad@northjersey.com.