

more Groningen residents saw examples of illegal or improper behavior, the more they violated other rules. Signs of previous “inappropriate behavior” such as graffiti or broken windows led to other such acts, including littering or stealing, the authors write. Each new example of antisocial activity undermined the general goal of doing the right thing.

SOCIETY

Training Mere Mortal Teachers

THE SOURCE: “Charter Schools and the Limits of Human Capital” by Steven F. Wilson, in *The Education Gadfly*, Nov. 6, 2008.

CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE GENERALLY failed to find a Petraeus-style solution to the urban school crisis. A surge of troops may have reduced sectarian violence in Iraq, but a surge of private innovation has produced only isolated successes in a sea of low test scores. Only 200 or so of the nation’s roughly 4,500 charter schools stand out as shining lights in the classroom firmament. Inevitably, writes Steven F. Wilson, the president of a charter school management company and senior fellow of an education think tank in Washington, the question turns to scale. Can rare exceptions be turned into everyday reality?

In a detailed examination of seven successful charter schools in Boston, Wilson found that all but one hewed to what is called the “no excuses” model: the phi-

losophy that every child can succeed and neither family dysfunction nor poor preparation is sufficient reason for failure. A rigorous academic program was established to prepare every child for college. The key to schools’ success was the hiring of driven and highly educated teachers who made “nearly heroic” efforts to overcome years of accumulated learning deficits in the students. More than half of these schools’ staff members had attended elite undergraduate institutions, and 82 percent had attended at least a “very competitive” college.

Each year, about 142,000 students graduate from these highly selective colleges, so even if one of every 10 of their graduates went into charter school teaching for the usual two years, this cohort would provide only six percent of the educators employed in the nation’s large urban school districts. And even if many non-elite teachers were highly capable, the gap would remain great. Success in school reform will always depend on tens of thousands of “mere mortals” who mostly aren’t interested in working more than the standard 40-hour week.

The keys to success, Wilson says, are vision and good management. That means precise adherence to an effective instructional system with tools for “school culture-building,” placement tests, a content-rich curriculum, frequent assessments, and other detailed help. Legislatures should raise the pay of starting teachers, and drop the certification requirements that bar many worthy

recruits. Teachers should be rewarded for performance in the classroom and not for seniority or degrees.

The entire social system does not need to be reformed before inner-city students can succeed. If shortages of qualified workers can be overcome in order to staff entire governments in developing countries, surely enough great teachers can be found to educate America’s most disadvantaged children.

SOCIETY

Mission Being Accomplished!

THE SOURCE: “Are We Finally Winning the War on Cancer?” by David M. Cutler, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Fall 2008.

AMERICA’S OFFICIAL 38-YEAR war on cancer has reduced deaths from the disease dramatically. But most of its success has not come from bravura breakthroughs in treatment. More lives have been saved by relatively humdrum screening tests.

In the first two decades after President Richard M. Nixon launched the war on cancer in 1971, cancer mortality rates rose twice as fast as before. By 1986, *The New England Journal of Medicine* was pronouncing the effort a “qualified failure.” But starting in 1990, cancer deaths for each 100,000 people of the same age began to decrease. By 2004, the cancer mortality rate was down 13 percent from its peak, writes David M. Cutler, an economist at Harvard University.

The four leading killers among all