

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

types of cancer are lung, colorectal, breast, and prostate. The lung cancer rate was down eight percent by 2004, mostly because so many people quit smoking. The colorectal cancer rate declined 26 percent between 1990 and 2004, largely because of better screening techniques. The breast cancer mortality rate fell 28 percent, generally because of mammography. And the death rate from prostate cancer plunged 31 percent because of early detection, hormone

therapy, and surgery.

America may finally be winning the war on cancer, Cutler says, but at heavy cost: \$15 billion in anti-cancer spending in 1972 became \$74 billion in 2005. Improved screening was the single most important change and one of the biggest bargains. Treatments, particularly new drugs, have also improved, but some of the new wonder pharmaceuticals sell for \$4,000 to \$100,000 per year. They

can extend the life of a cancer patient, but typically only for a few months, Cutler writes. Insurance generally covers efficacious drug therapies in the United States, regardless of cost, but in other countries cost sometimes trumps treatment. The United Kingdom's arbiters, for example, turned thumbs down on two \$50,000-to-\$100,000-a-year medications for colon cancer, simply ruling them "not cost-effective."

PRESS & MEDIA

Pressroom of Babel

THE SOURCE: "Memorandum to the President-Elect" by Mike McCurry, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Dec. 2008.

RICHARD M. NIXON WAS PRESIDENT when the White House Press Office was last revamped, and it is now suffering from hardening of the arteries. More Americans are interested in politics than ever, but an office that had specialized in communicating the president's daily message to major newspapers, magazines, and television networks must now deal with cable, websites, YouTube, comedy shows, and those 21st-century pamphleteers, the bloggers. The White House press

secretary needs a makeover, writes Mike McCurry, who held the job from 1995 to 1998 under President Bill Clinton. "But one person cannot adequately speak on behalf of the institutional

presidency."

Blow up the 35-year-old model of having one overexposed spokesperson be ground zero for every question, he says. Put articulate representatives from various parts of the government, from the new technology czar to the national security adviser, on camera to explain their own initiatives, straight. The recent press secretary arguably considered the

best of the lot—Marlin Fitzwater, who held the job under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush—honed his skills as an apolitical information officer in the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Treasury Department before moving to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Forget the single "line of the day," McCurry urges. It should give way to multiple information

EXCERPT

Enough, Already

The blogosphere, once a freshwater oasis of folksy self-expression and clever thought, has been flooded by a tsunami of paid bilge. Cut-rate journalists and underground marketing campaigns now drown out the authentic voices of amateur wordsmiths. It is almost impossible to get noticed, except by hecklers.

—PAUL BOUTIN, former *Wired* senior editor and correspondent for the Silicon Valley site *Valleywag*, in *Wired* (Nov. 2008)