

were launched in 2004.

Under the plans, consumers must buy relatively inexpensive health insurance with a very high deductible while placing up to \$5,450 (for a family of four) into tax-advantaged savings accounts to cover some of the potential costs before insurance kicks in. Among other things, the president wants to increase the amount people can save.

Bush's proposal has received the usual criticism from liberals and applause from conservatives, all of it delivered almost ritualistically. Whatever the fate of his ideas, both camps know that the larger debate will go on for years.

## SOCIETY

## The Busy Class

**THE SOURCE:** "Busyness as the Badge of Honor for the New Superordinate Working Class" by Jonathan Gershuny, in *Social Research*, Summer 2005.

"KEEPING BUSY?" ONE VICTORIAN gentleman would ask of another. The answer often had little to do with what modern folk might think of as work. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the pursuits that occupied the time of the moneyed classes—"sports, politics, the armed services, academics, and the arts"—fell into a category that economist Thorstein Veblen described as "leisure." Precisely because such leisure pursuits were separated from the necessary but grubby business of making money, they identified participants as members of the class of privilege.

How things have changed! Today, according to Jonathan Gershuny, a sociologist at the University of Essex, England, "long hours of paid work are

The most privileged now work more than the less privileged, a British sociologist concludes.

associated with advantaged social positions." The best-off are "increasingly employed in paid jobs that are intrinsically as well as financially rewarding," such as corporate management, and the legal and medical professions. Stranger still, this phenomenon has occurred despite an overall decline in the number of hours people are working. The inescapable conclusion: "The most privileged now work more than the less privileged."

In Gershuny's view, several factors account for this evolution. Longer life spans have reduced the flow of inherited wealth, forcing the children of the wealthy—mainly through higher education—to develop and use professional skills in order to maintain the same economic status enjoyed by their parents. At the same time, "innovations in the technology of production have led to enormous increases in the volume of professional and technical work." Such jobs guarantee high wages, and Gershuny cites a number of studies showing that "those with higher levels of earning power will choose longer hours of paid work time."

Gershuny believes that "busyness" at work has succeeded leisure as "the signifier of high social status." He bases this on time-budget diaries that indicate that even lower-earning workers and the unemployed seem as busy as high-wage earners. Why is this? Partly it is because of the range

of activities—errands and family responsibilities as well as traditional leisure pursuits—crammed into their nonwork hours. The steady rise of women in the workplace has also led to the sharing of a greater proportion of home responsibilities. But Gershuny suspects that at least part of this "I'm-so-busy" attitude pervading modern life is the perception that busyness—or at least its appearance—has now become a mark of social prestige.

## SOCIETY

## Education Takes a Baby Step

**THE SOURCE:** "A Decade of Effort" by Lynn Olson, "A Second Front" by Ronald A. Wolk, and "National Standards" by Diane Ravitch, in *Education Week's Quality Counts 2006*, Jan. 5, 2006.

THE STATES' EFFORTS SINCE THE early 1990s to hold public schools to explicit standards of academic achievement seem to have had a fairly positive impact. The improvement in students' test scores in mathematics and reading is "heartening," though certainly far from sufficient, says Lynn Olson, executive editor of the 10th edition of an annual report card issued by *Education Week*, a leading trade publication of the education industry.

Between 1992 and 2005, scores in fourth-grade math increased by almost 19 points on a 500-point scale used by the federal government, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That's the equivalent of nearly two grade levels. The increases were even greater for black (28 points) and Hispanic (24 points) fourth graders. Had white students'

scores not also improved, Olson points out, the black-white achievement gap that existed in 1992 would have shrunk by 80 percent.

Eighth graders made less dramatic but still significant gains in math, increasing their NAEP scores by 11 points nationally.

The record was less encouraging in reading. The national average score inched up just two points in both grades four and eight. Even so, the reading scores for black and Hispanic fourth graders, and for all low-income kids at that grade level, increased an amount nearly triple the national average. That is about two-thirds of a grade level.

Did the states' embrace of standards-based education help boost the NAEP scores? Such assessments are tricky, but the research arm of the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, which is the publisher of *Education Week*, concludes that it did.

However, Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, is critical of the fact that there are no *national* standards: "The idea that mastery of eighth-grade mathematics means one thing in Arizona and something different in Maine is absurd on its face." The states use their own standards, not NAEP scores, in assessing achievement, and most claimed that large majorities of their fourth and eighth graders were "proficient" in math and reading in 2005. Scores on the NAEP told a different story.

Ronald A. Wolk, chairman of the board of Editorial Projects in Education and an early supporter of the standards movement, now believes that the movement is "more part of the problem than the solution." It reinforces "the least desirable features

of the traditional school," including "obsession with testing and test prep, [and] overemphasis on coverage in curriculum and memorization."

Wolk sees more promise in replacing inadequately performing schools with more innovative institutions, such as charter schools. More than a decade of standards-based reform, he concludes, "has raised some test scores that were abysmally low to start with, but produced little else. Not a promising return for an all-or-nothing bet."

#### SOCIETY

## Toy Stories

**THE SOURCE:** "Selling Compromise: Toys, Motherhood, and the Cultural Deal" by Allison J. Pugh, in *Gender & Society*, Dec. 2005.

IF YOU'RE A WORKING MOTHER grappling with the high-anxiety conflict between the demands of home and work, everybody from Oprah to your mother-in-law is lined up to give you advice. Then there's the potent stuff that comes in subliminal form, through

media such as films and advertisements. The multibillion-dollar toy industry, for example, sends a very clear message, writes Allison J. Pugh, a fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. Toy ads uphold "the contemporary received wisdom of children as needing nurture or an emotional connection but with one important compromise: The child does not need people, specifically a mother, actually to provide it."

In 11 mail-order toy catalogs ranging from FAO Schwartz's to the more offbeat Natural Baby Company's, Pugh sees the promotion of an idealized concept of mother-driven parenting. The advertising copy feeds mothers' anxieties by declaring what skills children should develop, then offers the soothing solution of educational toys. If working mothers worry that they neglect a child's reading skills because they can't find time to read aloud, they can just buy a Winnie-the-Pooh bear programmed to "read" books to children instead.

In the world of toy catalogs, childhood is a solitary and learning-driven time, with toys serving as proxies for parents or even other children. Thus mothers are enticed to buy Rocket the robotic dog, an electronic aquarium that lulls babies to sleep, and the talking Pooh bear. The vast majority of catalog images in Pugh's survey depicted a child playing alone. The catalogs "are not selling toys as the means for deepening the bonds between other



A classic childhood scene, driven by the toy industry: A young child dresses her doll up, learning how to be a parent with no parent in sight.