

The Abell Report

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What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

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Abell Salutes: The Meyerhoff Scholars

Redressing the Balance

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All are black, male, and were among the best and the brightest in their high school class -- and all, along with seven others with similar credentials, are now Meyerhoff Scholars studying mathematics, science or engineering at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Foundation Scholarship program grew out of a recognition by Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, III, Vice Provost of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, that black males were a noticeably small and even declining percentage of college enrollment, and in particular, in the fields of math, science and medical studies. "Black men," according to Dr. Hrabowski, "are under-represented in the sciences, and few earn doctorates. The imbalance exists because young black men, who have few black professionals as role models, tend not to perceive themselves as being able to achieve these goals." The Meyerhoff scholarship program, providing UMBC with \$522,000, has been designed to help redress the balance.

The program started in the summer of 1989, and the students have had less than a full school year behind them. Still, according to Susan Boyer, Director of Academic Outreach and Coordinator of the program, "The students are

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LEARNFARE: In Wisconsin, Welfare Benefits Are Tied to School Attendance. Is Learnfare "For" Baltimore and/or Maryland?

It is a fact of life that the cycle of poverty is undoing a large section of the fabric of American life. Many believe the welfare system perpetuates the cycle, and many efforts have been made to break the cycle, with at best mixed and at worst disappointing results. For this reason, the eyes of many elected officials, sociologists, educators and just plain citizens are focused on Wisconsin. It is in this midwestern state that a new program designed to reduce the alarming specter of long-term welfare dependency by reducing teenage truancy is in operation. It is called Learnfare; it is called, too, at one and the same time, a success and a failure. No one knows how it will prove out, but many are watching. However, any discussion of Learnfare must be viewed in the larger national context of recent welfare reform.

Every state in the nation must by October 1990 implement Title II of the Family Support Act, "Job Opportunities and Basic Skills," signed into law in October 1988. This Welfare Reform act -- popularly known as JOBS -- mandates certain groups of AFDC recipients to participate in education and job training as the road up and out of dependency and as a condition of receiving their full welfare grant. The groups mandated to participate are those who have been on public assistance for long periods, young mothers (under 25) without a high school diploma whose children are over three (except that mothers under 20 without high school diplomas must participate, regardless of the ages of their children), and families whose children are within two years of losing their entitlement (16- and 17-year-olds).

It is this latter group to which the Learnfare approach is most relevant. There could be a lot at stake. Political sub-divisions across America, after examining the Wisconsin experience, might decide to emulate it, or to borrow from it.

Should Maryland be one of them?

* * *

What is Learnfare?

Simply put, Learnfare is a program that mandates school attendance for teen parents and school age dependent children in welfare households as a condition of continued eligibility. It is, in the end, a welfare reform initiative designed to encourage teenage recipients of Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), who are directly or indirectly receiving benefits, to attend school on a regular basis. (Learnfare, as originally introduced, includes teens only -- a concession to political realities in Wisconsin. At this point, however, Governor Thompson's office is looking to "expand Learnfare down to age six.")

The particular program of sanctions for failing to attend school has come to be known as Learnfare. It emanates from state policymakers' concerns about alarmingly high truancy and dropout rates among students, the basic skills deficits among welfare recipients, and perhaps most important -- the spectre of long-term welfare dependency as the fate of the poorly educated in an increasingly demanding labor market.

Learnfare has been described as an expression of a "social contract" model for structuring public assistance.

According to this model, government will provide income support and (in some cases) training and education to enhance competitiveness in the labor market *on condition* that the recipient fulfill an obligation to achieve a level of self-sufficiency consistent with his or her capabilities. This same model holds that programs to support the disadvantaged and unemployed have been permissive in character. Lawrence Mead, in his book on the subject, "Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligation of Citizenship" (*The Free Press*, New York, 1986), argues, "They (government agencies) have given benefits to their recipients but have set few requirements for how these recipients ought to function in return." Critics of that view argue that nowhere in this "social contract" is there an implied or explicit obligation on the part of public schools to provide a quality educational experience, alternative education, tutoring or counseling support for students who may be exhibiting their disenchantment by chronic truancy.

There are any number of versions of Learnfare, as the program exists or is in planning, in half a dozen states. They differ in definitions of persons affected and exemptions from participation, support services guarantees, provisions made for the parallel delivery of special educational services, and sanctions imposed on affected recipients. What they have in common is the particular sanction: the withholding of welfare benefits from families of truant (however defined) children.

By far the most popular model, the one furthest along in its implementation and, consequently, the most widely watched, is Learnfare in Wisconsin. An understanding of how it came into being, how it is functioning, what challenges it is facing and what results it is accomplishing are material to any consideration of Learnfare in Maryland.

The Wisconsin Learnfare Experience:

The program depends upon close monitoring of student attendance by the county income maintenance office and the prompt imposition of sanctions. Each month, the agency mails a list of students to be monitored to the appropriate school district. The schools send back a record of the number of times the student is absent. At every

six month AFDC interview, the attendance record of each teen student is reviewed. "Attendance" is clearly defined: If the student has more than ten unexcused absences or has dropped out of school, sanctions are imposed.

EDITORIALS

"For" and "Against" Learnfare

The Boston Globe:

"There will be problems with administering a Learnfare program, and they will have to be addressed. But the goal is a worthy one, and the potential benefits are sufficiently high to warrant consideration by the Legislature and human services officials."

Milwaukee Journal:

"Learnfare is the wrong answer. There is no quick fix to the truancy problem, but Learnfare pretends otherwise. Worst of all, it offers an inequitable fix."

New York Times:

"A state that imposes such an obligation on welfare parents at least incurs its own obligation to provide education programs and support services that offer a reasonable second chance for truant teenagers. As long as Wisconsin fails to do so, it ignores the fact that it is party to the social contract, too."

Philadelphia Inquirer:

"Combined with ambitious steps to make these kids *want* to graduate from high school, Learnfare can help them beat the odds. If it can work in Milwaukee, why not here in Philadelphia?"

A monitored student may have no more than two unexcused absences in a month. If the record shows more, the family's welfare check is reduced in the second month after the non-compliant behavior. To set the amount of the sanction, the non-compliant mem-

ber of the welfare family is ignored in calculating the grant amount. Sanctions vary from \$58 in large families to \$192 in two-person families, with the average sanction being about \$100. If a sanctioned dependent teen (a non-parent) is the only minor in the welfare family, a partial grant will be continued for three months, after which the case will be closed. The full grant is restored when compliance, as defined by the Learnfare program, has been documented.

Some students are exempted. Good-cause exemptions from the rule of unexcused absences include the following:

1. The student is expelled from school and alternative schooling is not available.
2. The teen has a child under three months of age.
3. No licensed day care is available for the child(ren) of teen parents subject to Learnfare
4. Prohibitive transportation problems exist (e.g., to and from day care).
5. The teen is over 16 years of age and not expected to graduate from high school by age 20.

No fact finding is undertaken before the sanction is imposed. Families have 45 days to appeal a sanction. After the appeal is filed, the benefit will be restored (or continued) until a ruling is made. If the sanction is upheld, the family is required to pay back that portion of their grant subject to the sanction for the period that the sanction was in force.

Despite political and procedural difficulties, a working Learnfare program was in place for the 1988-89 school year. Given the national interest in the initiative, the program provided an opportunity to examine the numerous process and outcome issues attendant on Learnfare -- an opportunity that was not capitalized upon.

- State officials eschewed legislative suggestions that the concept be piloted and evaluated before being fully implemented.
- Baseline data on school attendance patterns were not collected in a systematic fashion, so carrying out meaningful analyses will be extremely difficult.

(The University of Wisconsin is preparing a formal evaluation, but results are not expected until 1993.)

An interim study of the program's results was made by the Institute For Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison ("Learnfare: The Wisconsin Experience," Corbett, Deloya, Manning, Uhr, October 1989). The study pointed out that, based on preliminary administrative data available in August 1989, "Claims have been made that the program is a success. It has been noted, for example, that the mean length of a sanction during the 1988-89 school year was about three months and that some 70 percent of students sanctioned were penalized for three months or less. The conclusion drawn from these numbers, as publicized by DHSS (Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services), is that the sanction induced students to return to the classroom. While this could very well be the case, it is impossible to make such inferences from the data."

One study argues that we simply do not yet have reliable results.

- The sanctions could have been terminated for a variety of reasons -- people move and/or leave welfare; they appeal and have their grant restored; they find ways to circumvent regulations; they "age into" (turn 13) and/or "age out of" (turn 20) the program during the school year.
- DHSS assumes that the sanction months were consecutive (two or three months of non-compliance followed by continuing compliance with the attendance requirements). This may not be the case. Nor is there a way of knowing if it was the sanction that induced the change in behavior. Some other factor could have been responsible, such as the availability of child care.

The study argued that the dangers of rushing to judgment about the success of Wisconsin's Learnfare are manifest in a DHSS analysis of the data

This analysis, the study pointed out, "looked only at teens who were monitored by Learnfare for at least four consecutive months during the school year. Fewer than half of all teens sanctioned over the course of the year met that criterion (3,233 out of 7,234); of those 3,233 slightly more than half (54 percent) returned to school within three months, but only 38 percent returned to school and were still there after three months. These numbers are decidedly less optimistic than those publicized earlier.

"The bottom line is that the available numbers tell us nothing about the effectiveness of the program. It may well be that the actual, though unmeasured, success attributable to Learnfare is found in the extent to which it deters teens from engaging in non-compliant behavior in the first place.

"Given the limitations of these data, we simply do not know.

"Since there is no control group or even some reasonable non-equivalent comparison group, the numbers can only serve as descriptive outcomes and cannot be used as indicators of program impact."

The office of Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson was quick to publish early results reported by the state's Department of Health and Social Services -- perhaps too quick. The study came out in August following the first school year of implementation; it made the claim that 70 percent of the students affected by Learnfare's policy truancy penalty regained eligibility within three months for full AFDC, most of them because youngsters resumed schooling. But shortly after the claims were released, a research analyst within the department disputed the figures. She said her calculations, in fact, showed that only 37 percent were back in school. The writer of the report went public with the admonition that the report does not allow conclusions to be drawn from Learnfare.

In February 1990, after a full year and a half of Learnfare in operation, Governor Thompson's office presented this updated summary of the Learnfare program:

- Learnfare employs two components to accomplish its goal: the financial penalty or sanction, and supportive

services. The latter are generally ignored by program critics. Both are necessary for Learnfare to work.

- Regarding supportive services, nearly \$3.6 million was allocated during 1989 for child care and transportation for Learnfare teen parents. Over \$1.2 million has been budgeted to fund Learnfare alternative education placements.
- Learnfare case managers in Milwaukee were able to enroll 300 teen dropouts in alternative education programs during the 1988-89 school year; they referred 387 dropouts back to Milwaukee public schools. Since November 1988, these case managers have helped nearly 1,200 teens return to school.
- Financial sanctions are imposed on the parents of teens who fail to meet Learnfare school attendance requirements. The AFDC grant is reduced by about \$100 a month for each teen in the AFDC case who fails to meet the attendance requirement.

The office of Governor Thompson insists that the program "is working."

- The vast majority of AFDC teens regularly comply with Learnfare attendance requirements. The average statewide monthly compliance rate since September 1988 is (rounded) 92 percent. Statewide, except for Milwaukee County, the monthly compliance rate is 96 percent; in Milwaukee, the monthly compliance rate is 87 percent. (Comparably, in Maryland, attendance compliance for teens statewide is 89.7 percent; in Baltimore City, 79.5 percent).
- Of those teens who were sanctioned during the 1988-89 school year, 71.7 percent were sanctioned during only three or fewer months.

But in March, ahead of schedule, the University of Wisconsin issued figures that indicated the program may be far less effective than the state had

reported earlier. Only 28 percent of the Milwaukee County teenagers punished for poor attendance under the program returned to school and were there after two months. (The earlier analysis by the state had put the rate at 70 percent).

Responding to the decidedly negative report, Shirley Jackson, Administrator of Economic Support in the state's Department of Health and Social Services, said, "Their numbers are not wrong, but they are taking a different cut to examine. Their figures are accurate *for what they are*, but ours are, too -- for what *they are*. And the state of Wisconsin remains optimistic and we are going to continue Learnfare. As we interpret the status of our Learnfare program, it's working. In terms of our objectives, we see it as being effective."

***Critics
suggest that
Learnfare might upset
the delicate balance
that exists
between teens
and their parents.***

For an observer of the program, looking for definitive findings, the essential question remains: What *would* have been the attendance patterns (or school performance, or some other measure of "success") of the students in the absence of the program when compared with those exposed to the program? At this point, that question cannot be answered and, in fact, may never be answered from the initial Wisconsin experience.

Still, some observations by persons involved in the program are worth noting. For one thing, in a society increasingly sensitive to the egalitarian tradition, there seems to be considerably more support than might be expected for the proposition that welfare recipients -- as part of the social contract -- owe something to the state in exchange for the benefits they receive. The degree of this support is explained by Corbett, Deloya, Manning and Uhr, in their study, "Learnfare; The Wisconsin Experience," (University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1988): "Income support without obligation has been viewed with

disfavor throughout much of history. Early welfare programs took the position that people were poor because they had no money. The solution was direct: provide them with the shortfall. But in the 1980s...(welfare) moved from an emphasis on contextual/environmental explanations to those emphasizing personal responsibility and concerns about behavioral dependency. Learnfare, to the extent that it imposes conditions on the receipt of public assistance, represents a return to the historic way of structuring welfare." And increasing school attendance was something that virtually all observers who shared this view were in favor of. As one Milwaukee official put it, "This at least gets their attention and into the front door where we have a shot at helping them."

Critics have other concerns. One is the recognition that Learnfare might in certain family situations upset the sensitive balance that exists between teens and their parents, putting an economic weapon in the hands of teens -- since their behavior could, in each case, help determine the size of the family income. It is also thought by some that Learnfare might adversely affect the general environment in some classrooms if unmotivated Learnfare-induced returnees disrupt classes. Still a third concern is that the state will fail to provide sufficient resources to support appropriate interventions that will address the numerous factors associated with truancy and educational maladjustment.

A staff attorney for the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, Josie Foehrenbach, in an article on Learnfare prepared for Youth Education and Employment Policies Linkage Project, concluded her observations with strongly worded cautions against a too-rapid implementation of any version of Learnfare.

"A sanction-without-service model will likely achieve neither basic attendance improvement nor more ambitious remedial educational goals. A preoccupation with forcing absent students to return to school, while neglecting to offer needed remedial compensatory or alternative educational programs or essential social service supports, represents a prescription for continued disappointment for both the government and AFDC families.

Learnfare's negative potential stems from its tendency to oversimplify poor students' educational situations and to avoid institutional reform issues."

* * *

Is Learnfare "for" Baltimore or Maryland? And, in any case, what can Baltimore and Maryland learn from Learnfare? According to Ms. Shirley Marcus, Director of the Department of Social Services of Baltimore City, the answers are, "No," and "Not much."

Ms. Marcus joins supporters of Learnfare in recognizing the merit of the Learnfare concept. "At first blush, Learnfare is an interesting concept -- especially in view of an increasing public belief that a recipient of public funds -- call it 'welfare' -- should in some way fulfill an obligation to society by more appropriate functioning and self-sufficiency. However, when one goes beyond the promotional fanfare, a number of concerns become evident. By reducing its grant, Learnfare punishes a vulnerable family unit, existing on inadequate income in the first place, for the poor attendance of some of its children."

***"Let Learnfare be directed
at the parents...
not their children."***

Shirley Marcus, Director
Dept. of Social Services
Baltimore City

Such actions, Ms. Marcus feels, blame the parent, who is already a victim of poverty, for problems he or she is unable to handle. Such families would obviously require a host of supportive services and this need raises the question of whether the city and the state would provide such significant -- and costly -- support. Without that support there should be no sanctions.

And standing in the way of implementing Learnfare in whole or in part, Ms. Marcus says, is the gnawing question of what, in any program designed to deal with attendance, constitutes "compliance" in the first place; lack of a clear definition, and of norms school district

to district, Ms. Marcus feels, frustrates the process of sanctioning.

In the end, it is her department's position that the city has just begun the implementation of Project Independence (Maryland's and the city's name for federal welfare reform), which

"We already have a system comparable to Learnfare."

Dr. Stuart Tabb
Specialist,
Attendance/Court Services
Baltimore City Public Schools

already contains many of the features and sanctions that are drawing attention to Learnfare. And given the problems thought by many to be indigenous to Learnfare (the provoking of confrontation within families and of disruptive behavior in the classroom), the state's focus should be on enhancing parental functioning, as Project Independence is attempting to do in Baltimore. "It is when a parent is better equipped to function more effectively as a person," Marcus says, "that he or she is better able to function as a parent. Let Learnfare be directed at parents and let us sanction them for non-compliance, not their children."

Dr. Stuart Tabb, Specialist, Attendance/Court Services for Baltimore City, speaking for the Baltimore City School System, takes the view that the system does not need Learnfare because it already has in place a mechanism that is effective and working.

Tabb recalls that in Baltimore some ten years ago, when similar sanctions had been considered, it was the community's consensus that such sanctions would further "victimize the victim." "I can speak for the Baltimore City School System," he says, "when I say that our system is strongly opposed to Learnfare. In effect, it singles out those on public assistance for penalties. Baltimore City already has, and is using, an accessible punitive system that is in place, and working. It is the District Court system.

"In our system, if a child is absent 20 percent of the time in any grading period (nine absences a quarter), in

accordance with state law, we have the means and often do formally charge the parent and the child with neglect, with violating compulsory attendance requirements. Last year we charged 250 parents and their 300 children. The parent is subject to a fine or prison and sometimes both of these things. In the few hundred cases in recent years, the court has been able to levy a fine of \$50 a day for unlawful absences. When parents could not pay, they have, in certain cases, gone to jail.

"We do look for supportive probationary programs which seek to compel children to attend school under the threat that the parent is subject to fine and imprisonment. And some of those probationary programs do work out.

"My point is, we already have a mechanism comparable to Learnfare and we use it more readily than most other states. Last year, as I mentioned earlier, we charged 250 parents and

"In Maryland, we think there are more appropriate and effective methods of preventing youngsters from dropping out of school."

Marion Pines
Chair of State Welfare Policy
Task Force and Project
Independence Mgmt. Team

their 300 children. After studying those cases, we conclude that our program works: we can document a 23 percent improvement in attendance in that group."

Critics of the District Court System, however, suggest that the percentage of the total problem cases represented by the "250/300 charged" figures are insignificant, compared to the overall volume of such cases that should be charged.

Is Learnfare "for" Maryland and what, in any case, can the state learn from it?

George Sinclair, Acting Deputy Executive Director of the state's

Income Maintenance Administration, feels that Maryland is now committed to Project Independence, which he feels contains many of the features of Learnfare, but which is lacking in at least one particularly attractive aspect of it: a clear-cut definition of enrollment allowing for clear-cut power to sanction.

"Prior to the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1988," Sinclair says, "Maryland had sought to implement portions of the Wisconsin Learnfare program into our welfare program, specifically, the requirement that parents under 18 without a high school diploma return to school. This requirement was to have been coupled with a fiscal sanction -- withholding money from the welfare check -- if the child failed to comply with the requirement. But before we could implement this requirement, the Family Support Act was passed and we were required to adjust our program (Project Independence) to meet federal regulations."

With the implementation of Project Independence, both state and federal policy require children ages 16 to 18 of AFDC families to attend school or take courses leading to a GED. As long as these children attend school or an alternative program full time, as determined by the school, they are not considered Project Independence participants and therefore are not subject to sanctions (grant reductions) for any non-participatory behavior. "'Attendance' is determined by the school," Sinclair points out, "-- that is the troubling caveat."

Under this arrangement, it is only after a school system officially drops the AFDC child from the school rolls that he or she becomes a mandatory Project Independence participant and then can be required to participate in an education or training program. Failure to do so will result in sanctions against the household -- the actual loss of welfare monies of \$50 to \$75 a month until the child returns to the educational or training program.

Since Learnfare was implemented before passage of the Family Support Act, Wisconsin is operating under a waiver of this particular federal regulation. Therefore, Learnfare functions without the encumbrance of federal regulations that require students be

out of school before they are subject to the process designed to keep them in school. If Learnfare is not, as some believe, fair, it is, as all would have to believe, fast: ten unexcused absences in six months puts the student in a monitoring situation; from there, two unexcused absences a month are allowed. If there are more, the family's welfare check is reduced. "Whatever criticism you can make of Learnfare," Sinclair says, "the way is open to it so that it does what it does fast."

Both the city and the state appear to agree; neither would implement the program as it is currently operating in Wisconsin. But both would appear to agree that Learnfare's definition of absences is sharply defined and its program of sanctions is more quickly

***Neither Baltimore City
nor the State
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and easily brought to bear -- and so is far less liberal than the city's or the state's. In Wisconsin, the policy is clear; a student's missing a certain amount of (unexcused) days automatically triggers the process of sanctions. In Maryland and in Baltimore, the policy is less clear; different schools set different standards for when they choose to drop a student from the rolls and set in motion the sanctioning process. And, it is important to note, Wisconsin sanctions "truancy"; Maryland sanctions "dropping out," a condition less easily defined. Learnfare, without excusing what many insist are its considerable failures, works faster and for a larger population.

Commenting on Learnfare, Marion Pines, Chair of the State Welfare Policy Task Force and Project Independence Management Team and Vice Chair of the Governor's Employment and Training Council, says, "Any issue that raises the spectre of a welfare-school attendance policy must also recognize the close relationship between a quality education and poverty.

Long-term studies reveal that the majority of 15- to 18-year-olds who drop out of school with poor basic skills will still be poor eight years hence, but those who acquire good basic skills and advanced education reduce their chances of remaining poor to almost zero. Poor kids are dependent on good schools and quality schooling.

***Needed:
An exchange of ideas . . .
to bring Baltimore and
Maryland's welfare/school
attendance programs
closer to
client need and
community aspiration.***

"In discussing the merits of Learnfare, one must question whether threatening the family's subsistence has a positive or negative effect on valuing education. Regardless of current federal regulations, there are deeper issues of public policy that require discussion. Does a Learnfare approach encourage or discourage positive parental involvement in their children's education? Does it reinforce schools as a hostile environment (reporting absences to the welfare department which reduces subsistence payments)? Does it encourage more family instability (errant behavior by teens reducing family income)? Does it discriminate against poor families? How much control do parents have over teen behavior?

"In Maryland, we think there are more appropriate and effective methods of preventing youngsters from dropping out of school. We still have a long way to go in providing a quality education for all students and particularly for those students most at risk of dropping out. Why punish the victims?"

No one can be certain of what specific elements should go into a program designed to reduce the dropout population, encourage AFDC teens to graduate in order to achieve self-sufficiency for themselves and -- over the years of their lives -- break the chain of poverty for their families.

A quick solution is surely too much to hope for.

But Wisconsin's Learnfare, coming onto the scene as it has, presents a new opportunity to debate the complex issues. Such an exchange of ideas in the public forum may work to bring Baltimore's and Maryland's welfare/school attendance programs closer to client need and to community aspiration.

And that is not too much to hope for.

The Meyerhoff Scholars

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doing very well both academically and in the social context. They fit in on campus. They've made serious friendships with each other during the summer orientation program, and I believe this bonding is a plus -- the support it provides is important.

"Academically, the facts speak for themselves: out of the ten, four got 4.0 -- straight A's and the mean grade point average for the fall semester was 3.67. And -- we had no dropouts.

"A particularly healthy sign, and I believe a measure of how much the students value the program, is their strong interest, stated to us clearly: they want to share in the development of the program.

"We think we are helping to create a small cadre of black, male scientists and engineers whose growing numbers will start moving the figures on their presence, on campus and later in the larger community, the other way."

The Abell Foundation, committed as it is to the economic development of the region and to serving the underserved within it, joins the community in its appreciation of the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Foundation for identifying the particular problem of this adversely shifting balance in American education, and for efforts to redress it.

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