

The Rouge Forum

Winter 2000 Issue #3

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Whole Schooling Consortium

International Education Summit for a Democratic Society

I participate

The Rouge Forum newspaper was created entirely through voluntary efforts.

The Rouge Forum

The Rouge Forum is interested in teaching and learning for a democratic society. You are invited to join us.



Brer Rabbit

News Flash!



**The Fall 2009 /
Winter 2010 of
the Rouge
Forum News is
now online!**

Check out the only clear
expression of education
radicalism in the US

The *Rouge Forum* is a group of educators, students, and parents seeking a democratic society. We are concerned about questions like these: How can we teach against racism, national chauvinism and sexism in an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic society? How can we gain enough real power to keep our ideals and still teach--or learn? Whose interests shall school serve in a society that is ever more unequal? We are both research and action oriented. We want to learn about equality, democracy and social justice as we simultaneously struggle to bring into practice our present understanding of what that is. We seek to build a caring inclusive community which understands that an injury to one is an injury to all. At the same time, our caring community is going to need to deal decisively with an opposition that is sometimes ruthless.

We hope to demonstrate that the power necessary to win greater democracy will likely rise out of an organization that unites people in new ways--across union boundaries, across community lines, across the fences of race and sex/gender. We believe that good humor and friendships are a vital part of building this kind of organization, as important as theoretical clarity. Friendships allow us to understand that action always reveals errors--the key way we

learn. We chose Brer Rabbit as a symbol to underline the good cheer that rightfully guides the struggle for justice. Every part of the world is our briar patch.

We had modest success in defeating the standardized test, the MEAP, in Michigan. We work in faculty organizations and unions to deal with the racism and sexism in academia. We try to press forward questions of class size, curricular freedom, anti-racist pedagogy, real inclusion, and a just tax system. As part of the *Whole Schooling Consortium*, we have sponsored forums in the U.S., uniting hundreds of people for democracy and equality.

There are no dues to join the Rouge Forum. Just email rougeforum@pipeline.com

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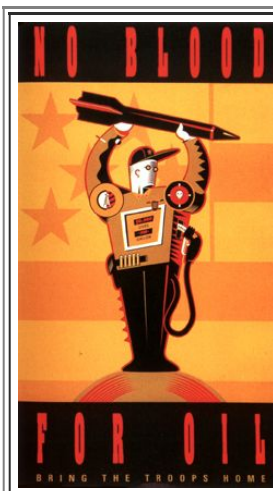
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Petition against the Big Tests**

Make A Donation

Madness of Evil Authority Paralyzing our children

By Dr.Scatron and

Professor #2 Pencil

Like most of you connected to education, the two of us have been struggling with the nonsense of the MEAP during our teaching careers. Unfortunately for us, we are now experiencing it more directly thanks to Lansing bureaucrats who have included social studies as a part of this test. As unimportant and irrelevant as we used to view the MEAP, we do so even more now. This test has got to go!!

Our wonderful district, following the lead of the board, superintendent, and principals have decided to jam this test down the throats of the teachers and students at our school. Although it is bad for all departments, most of our complaints are with the racist, thought forming (not provoking) social studies test that we are now faced with. This test has got to go!!

The leaders of our school are taking drastic matters which are not accomplishing what they think will be achieved. They think promoting the MEAP as a positive, good experience will improve scores. They won't. We are still 3 1/2 months away from the test, with many more promotional, pep rally type days to come, and the kids are very sick of the MEAP already. They think wasting hours of class time with workshops/seminars/practice tests for the kids will improve the scores. They won't. The kids don't listen, don't care, don't relate to the MEAP and

grow to resent the idea of it more and more each day. This test has got to go!!

Teachers are being forced to choose between being a good employee or a good teacher. These standardized exams destroy students' ability to be critical, creative, and most importantly, caring human beings. Something else that we are experiencing in our school is probably the most disturbing of all. Kids are being scared, threatened, and lied to.

- 1.They are being told that they must improve their scores for themselves we all know why they want the scores improved, to make administration look good.
- 2.They are being demeaned and chastised for previous bad scores these poor kids already have a hard enough time with self-esteem and now this.
- 3.They are being told they must take this test and must do well for an advanced high school diploma and so their transcripts will look good for colleges. We all know colleges don't care- the advanced diploma means nothing.

4.They are being told that everyone must take this test, no dismissals. Kids need to know that with a note from a parent, or probably just a refusal to sit and take the test, they can get out of it.

Parents and students all over this state need to be informed and take action against the boards, superintendents, and principals who are abusing these children. Children are being told what to think and what to believe in. The creativity and morale of teachers is being destroyed. The self-esteem of children is being crushed. And all of this when we know the scores are consistently predictable. Wealthy white districts will continue to score the highest. Poorer districts and districts with minorities will continue to score lower. Not because wealthy white students are so much more capable of doing well, but because the test is unbalanced, unfair, and irrelevant. This test has got to go!! Take a stand against the Madness of Evil Authority Paralyzing our children.

Unless

By Anonymous

My training in college was first in science and second in teaching. Teaching middle school science has given me the opportunity to combine both of my passions. Through a blend of hands-on labs, activities, music, games, and cooking, I have developed my own unique style of teaching the MEGOSE objectives for science.

I share this with you because it is part of the pleasure I receive from teaching science. While I know there is no "test" to tell if one is a good teacher, comments and return visits from former students, and yes, even standardized tests scores tell me that I am teaching what the students need. I don't agree with the MEAP test or some of the placement of the science concepts, but teaching and sharing my enthusiasm for science is what I enjoy. It has been that way for nearly ten years, until now.

Last year our students scored very low on the Science MEAP test. The reason why is simple, and I am sure it is something happening in other buildings. Teachers are not qualified to teach science and teachers are not teaching the objectives. We have staff in our building with reading degrees teaching science. We have staff who go from cover to cover using a science book that is almost 15 years old. Reading and worksheets are the stable in some of the science rooms. How interesting can that be from day to day? I am not judging the teaching style of teachers. Everyone learns a different way. What I am frustrated about is that the objective the students need to learn to play and win at this game called MEAP are not being taught. There are also other variables, such as socio-economics, that come into play. The one factor we can control, which is teaching the objectives, is not done.

During the summer my frustration and disappointment drove me to the very top of the district food chain. Just as the Lorax went to the Once-ler to speak for the trees, I went to speak for my students. Leaving that sunny summer day, I had a feeling that maybe sticking my neck out was a step in the right direction and hopefully it would promote the change I hoped for. Change did occur, but not what needed to be done. A few weeks into the school year, myself and the other teachers teaching eighth grade science were asked to redo the prior year of science, since our scope and sequence is set up for that grade to contain the bulk of the MEAP. My heart dropped. I had units to teach that the students never had. After explaining this information, a compromise was reached. We would teach the units not covered and starting in the beginning of November, we were to start MEAP review.

This meant covering 13 units in a few months time with all the disruption of holidays and other middle school events. Currently, I spend hours literally cramming information in their heads, some of which they have just heard for the first time. There is no time for labs, activities, etc. Please don't forget the endless practice tests. Is that how someone learns and enjoys science? Both the students and myself are, needless to say, unhappy. There are many days where I have wondered if what I am doing has any point or meaning. To pass a stupid test? It is hard to contain my dislike for the MEAP test and what it has forced us to do. I even question whether I am more of a good science teacher or a good employee of this district. I know from experience and research that what we are doing results in very little improvement. The stress of doing what I know does not work or enjoy has even created medical problems for me. Is the MEAP test really worth all this effort and aggravation? Not to mention the fact that the reason I teach and why students come to learn science is gone. So "unless" something changes, I will continue to question myself if being asked to teach science in this manner is something I still want to do.

Do You Know This Man

By Katy Landless

When I first learned of the concept alienation, a picture of a person came to my mind. In fact, this person still comes to my mind. He is my own personal image of alienation. This person is a worker who has a repetitious job, a worker who does the same task over and over, every day and every week. This worker that I envision works hard and works often. He, yes, my picture is of a man although for no reason which I can defend, is bored with the repetition because this work is not up to his potential. His work provides him no rewards of equal value to him as a human being. His work does provide him with time to think, more time than he wants, but it offers no occasion for him to put his thoughts into practice. No one cares about his opinions on how things should be run or how things could be better. In fact, if his bosses could have it their way, he would not think on the job at all, he is only supposed to work. To the rulers, thinking on the job may mean that he will come up with better ideas than the ones in place. It may mean that his thoughts could become a threat, they could some day be put into action. He may even share his thoughts and someone around him may agree and then their ideas gain strength and become more and more real to the ones on top. This worker that I pictured may have had thoughts at one point in time, but I am not sure because to see him, is to see a void. If he thought, he may not now. If he thinks he does not bother to share. He works. He works for little at a monotonous and strenuous job. He is thought of by his bosses as a means of production, like a machine, like an ox. His only reason for working is, for himself, to survive. His only reason for working, to the world who owns him, is to benefit that world which he will not know.

This person has always made me sad. He hates his job, which for so many others like him, is too much a part of his existence to ignore. He feels powerless and unneeded. He is not quite sure however, if it is the work that he hates or the fact that he is not valued, he is not equal - that makes him angry and embarrassed. He feels as if he must tolerate his lot in life because the system around him tells him he is replaceable and only needed to the extent in which he completes his task. He hates his boss for recognizing him only as a link in a monotonous and never ending chain. He despises his peers who have allowed themselves to be overcome by this unjust system and accept it without question and refuse to acknowledge that this is not what life is for. He is frustrated that he is angry and no one else seems to be - his peers are sheep and his bosses are power. He is confused at the world for not being mad too.

This man makes me sad and the world that created him makes me angry. I do not feel pity for him because he has to work hard. I do not feel sorry for him because he cannot afford riches. It upsets me that this man is disappointed in himself for thinking, or at least thinking years ago, and allowing himself to grow blank. It is sad that he is disappointed in himself because he has given into the system. It is sad that he is disappointed in himself because he has allowed what he knows is wrong to surround him and defeat him. It angers me that alienation is so strong. It angers me that alienation is such a part of our world that most people do not even know it exists. Most people do not even have this man in their heads. Most people do not know this man exists to even feel these emotions and it scares me that too many people, if they knew of this man, would believe he deserves what he gets. It scares me that as an educator in a so-called democracy, I could become this man.

After reading the following selection, which title do you think the author would choose for this piece?

A. *The MEAP RULES LITERALLY*

B. *SUBTLE THOUGHT CONTROL*

C. *CREEPING FASCISM*

D. *ICE CREAM IS GOOD*

E. *All of the above*

By Gregory Queen

To understand the social world, I think that an analysis of capitalism is crucial. Simply put, the tendency in capitalism is a concentration of wealth into a few hands. Hence, creating an elite that lines the forces of the state to protect its privileged position. Historically, the elite have attempted to "eternalize" a version of truth that diverts attention away from their privilege. For example, the dominant belief during the European Middle Ages was the idea that the earth is the center of the universe. The Catholic Church, supported by and supporting the Kings of the time, killed and excommunicated people who said otherwise. The motive of the Church and the Kings (the elite) was to stop the forces that undermined their overarching authority. Another fine example was McCarthyism. People in public schools, universities, and workplaces were fired, harassed, and labeled for criticizing the policies and dominant ideas of the period. It is clear that Joe McCarthy had an agenda: to allow the elite in the United States to proceed in domestic and foreign repression of the people's desire for a more just and equal society. In foreign policy, the repression is illustrated in the US involvement in Iran and Guatemala during the 1950's. Domestically, the repression is illustrated during the Civil Rights movement. The MEAP is very similar. I intend to illustrate this by asking a few questions about the people who wrote the MEAP and the objectives they allegedly assesses.

Do the people who want a MEAP, who created the MEAP, and who evaluate MEAP "answers" have the same understanding of the way the world works as myself, the students I teach, the community in which I work, the community in which I live, the managers of the school, my colleagues and/or the managers of my union? They may or they may not. It may appear that "we are all in the same boat," but I do not think we are. Do the people who live in Detroit, Warren, Roseville or Redford have the same interest as those on Lakeshore Drive or in Bloomfield Hills? Are the kids more intelligent in those latter communities causing them to perform better on the MEAP test, or is it because they have more money for the education process? Do the people who construct the MEAP objectives and tests have the same ideas as those working class communities or the ruling class communities? Is it possible that the cause for the differences in the scores on MEAP test is the idea that one's material world shapes one's ideas and concepts of truth? Would a person who lived in Bloomfield Hills be intelligent enough to live and survive in a crack infested community? I asked my students why they think their performance on the MEAP tests tended to be not as "proficient" as more wealthy communities and their response was that they must be more stupid than them. From my experience, the kids I teach are not stupid. In fact, I am consistently amazed at the concepts that they are able to grasp. However, the MEAP says otherwise. Why?

To illustrate the point that the "suggested core curriculum that the state tests has a particular agenda, I will raise a few illustrative questions.

One objective for the middle school social studies students is to "explain how the rule of law protects individual rights and serves the common good." What is the "common good?" Would Martin Luther King and all the people in the Civil Rights Movement have thought that segregation laws were there to protect the "common good?" Does common good mean not striking for better pay and working conditions or its opposite? Is the law that more severely restricts a teachers unions' right to strike protect the common good? What if the state started to pay school districts less money which impacted the students right to an education? Should the teachers obey the law and not strike because it would not be for the common good?

Another objective says students should be able to "describe means used by the United States to resolve international conflict?" Does this mean that as a teacher I should teach how the United States Government passed laws for the forced removal of the Cherokee Indians to Indian territory which later became Oklahoma? Does this mean that I should teach that the United States had the right to intervene in Vietnam killing two to six million Vietnamese and severely destroying their natural environment through chemical weapons?

An economic objective states that kids should be able to "compare the historical record of market economies in solving the problem of scarcity." Does this mean that I should discuss how some farmers dispose of produce or do not produce an abundance of products even though we have people in this country (and in the world) who do not have enough to eat as evidenced by our free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs? How do capitalist explain the fact that the number of demands placed on soup kitchens has increased despite "great" economic statistics?

"Use historical biographies to explain how events from the past affected the lives of individuals and how some individuals influenced the course of history" is an objective in the historical perspective of the state standards. Does this objective mean that I should focus on Karl Marx and how his critique of capitalism has influenced and promoted many liberation struggles for freedom and equality throughout the world?

I only pose these questions to show that the people who wrote the objectives probably did not have in mind these ideas when writing the objectives. Their ideas of knowledge and truth are probably not the same as mine. In fact, I think that they want to exclude mine and many other "dissenting" ideas from public institutions. The same type of people who wrote the objectives also construct the questions for the MEAP social studies test. Therefore, if what I believe is true is reflected in my organization and presentation of the social studies, which it is, not only for me but for all teachers (even the people who claim it is not), then my students may not see the world exactly as the MEAP creators do.

My point is that the MEAP is regulated knowledge. It has a particular agenda. It appears to support critical thinking as long as this thinking stays within established boundaries. How does a society "progress" or grow when it must stay within established boundaries? The State of Michigan and most of the people who support regulated knowledge say that they are doing it because they think that it will improve education. However, if you go beyond the appearance of things and look at its essence, it is an external tool used to increase the power of those who already have too much power. Through the MEAP, the state of Michigan is controlling curriculum (and schools).

In conclusion, I think that the government during these times of increased economic inequality reflects the interest of the capitalist elite. Therefore, the capitalist elite dominate the debate and policies of primary institutions like education. But it does not have to be that way.

MY RESPONSE TO "SCHOOLS NEED CONSISTENCY"

By Michelle Trusty-Murphy

I stopped at a restaurant on my way home from California, but it wasn't McDonald's. It was a small place on a side road with the sign: "Antiques and Mexican Food." I looked at the menu before my kids and I went in--it was reasonable. It looked clean. In fact, it was down right charming.

Inside I was met by a young man, no more than twelve. "May I show you to your table?" he said with practiced and polished meter. The waitress was his grandmother, the cook was his grandfather, and the restaurant not only had excellent food, it also had a wonderful and warm environment for my kids.

There was, in one corner, a toy from the turn of the century. The waitress invited my children to play with it: "It is an old favorite. Kids have played with it in this restaurant for over 20 years--it won't break." My kids had a blast. I had a wonderful dinner, and I resolved never to stop at a super-mega burger joint again on my way back over Interstate 80.

There are those travelers who won't stop anywhere else but one of those super-mega burger joints, and frankly, they have missed a lot of quality in the name of consistency.

One of those consistency-minded fellows is [Nevada] State Board of Education member, Bill Hanlon. He has used his experience with consistency over quality in the restaurant world to argue consistency over quality in our schools. He wrote, "If you were out with your kids and they were hungry, would you stop at a mom and pop type place, or would you go to a franchise like McDonald's or Carrows? The answer for the majority is they would go where they know what the food will be like, how long it will take, to be served and the cost."

Mr. Hanlon then argues that standardized testing and standards will improve schools and says, "If public schools and teachers want to have any credibility, they have to address common expectations and consistency."

I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of a teacher sacrificing the needs of individual students for the sake of consistency. My child should not be regarded in the same way as a uniformly sized 1/4 pound patty of meat in order to make the industry of education work more efficiently and consistently. My child might need a bit more spice in the classroom, a touch less heat, or a little more sugar than another child.

I want an educational system that knows that education in a free society like America has never been, and will never be, consistent. I want a teacher who knows that good teaching is a lot like good cooking--you have a recipe book (the standards), you have various different spices (the teaching materials), and you have the ingredients (the children). A good cook starts with a cookbook, but they must individualize every recipe to take into consideration the variation inherent in fresh ingredients (our kids come in all flavors, sizes, and types), the current style of preparation (low fat, ethnic, etc.), and the tastes of the critic who will

judge the final outcome (the parents & the society at large).

Although teaching by the book might work for some kids, it won't work for others. A good recipe doesn't guarantee good results, or we would all be gourmet cooks. Good teachers have the education, the experience, and the creativity needed to find that subtle balance that will work in their classroom, with the kids, with the parents, in their school, in their district, etc.

Mr. Hanlon and the rest of the State Board of Education must realize that good teaching, like good cooking, is an art, not a science.

If we demanded consistency over quality in our schools we would find the same sort of unpalatable results we find in those super-mega burger joints. Those places rely on an uneducated and cheap labor force who are not allowed to deviate from the company-controlled and timed cooking practices that maintain those standard results. If Mr. Hanlon wants our teachers to "cook by the book," he will force our best teachers into the private "mom and pop" schools where they can still exercise a measure of control over the education of children. Our public schools will be left with an uneducated, inexperienced, low paid labor force of dissatisfied teachers hoping to get into another field.

The changes the legislature and the State Board of Education have already implemented have moved dangerously close to Mr. Hanlon's consistent world. The use of straight-jacket standards isn't about making education better--it is about making education cheaper, easier, and less individualized. These changes take the power from local control and put it into the hands of bureaucrats and politicians on the state and federal level.

Mr. Hanlon, leave cooking and educating to those who care about kids. Our kids don't need to be standardized, they need to be educated.

Dr. Michelle Trusty-Murphy, a resident of Minden, will be a candidate for the Nevada State Board of Education in November 2000.

THE MEAP AND SPECIAL KIDS

Michael Peterson

I was at a school the other day observing a reading group in an elementary school. A 3rd grader who I will call Paul talked excitedly about the test that is coming up. He had heard about the big party¹ that the school district throws for kids who pass the test. "Yes," said the teacher, "If you pass the MEAP they have a huge celebration and your name is called and written in the paper." He beamed with excitement about the prospect of the party and the recognition.

At another school I talked with a teacher about a similar kid. "We are going to recommend to his mother that she exempt him from the MEAP," she explained. "I don't think he will pass it and he will be crushed if he doesn't. He does not need something else telling him that he's no good."

At yet another school, I talked with an administrator. She described how she sees a flurry of referrals to special education a month or so before "MEAP time". She's talked with other administrators who are trying to get students labeled as special education so "they don't have to take the MEAP". Of course, federal law now doesn't allow for the wholesale exclusion of some

students though many caring teachers try to help shelter their kids. Everyone knows the administrative routine: don't let special education kids take the test so that our test scores won't go down. While the latest version of the special education law was, in fact, intended to prohibit this from happening, according to this administrator, the law requires that the test be given to special education students, not that their scores are reported.

I met with a colleague with a respected community activist in Detroit. We talked about the crisis of the Detroit Public Schools and the needs for people to see alternatives to the worksheet driven, oppressive schooling that is too typical. As we talked about the problems caused by the MEAP in taking time away from real learning, she said that the "last thing we should ask of parents is to boycott the MEAP". I was surprised. "Why?" I asked. "Because these parents see that they have two choices. Either their children pass the MEAP or they will go to prison."

As an educator particularly concerned about kids with special needs, the stories have rolled around in my mind reverberating many themes. Our first child, so excited about the party if he passed the MEAP and the concern of the impact on the second child's self-esteem. Yet, both are bad choices. Students know when they are excluded and they know why. Yet what

happens to those students who do not pass the MEAP in a district where the party is for those who did? What happens to the kid who goes home not taking the test because he knows people figure he won't pass it. Do we think that kids- special and otherwise do not see the flurry of activity about getting the scores up and do we think that they do not know that scores are more important than they are? And the most powerful irony is that parents themselves, particularly parents whose resources are fewer, who deserve our support rather than our oppression, believe they have the choice of the MEAP or prison?

The fundamental philosophy of good schooling is that we help children become the best of who they can be. To do that, we provide engaging experiences, we build a community of care and concern around them, we help them experiment, support their excitement about engaging the world. We build schools where kids with all sorts of different abilities can learn together.

Parents of students with special needs cross over typical boundaries of race and class. Over time, parents of these students have been powerful forces in shaping special services in schools for their children. However, in an age in which "inclusion" is much discussed, few in the special education

community have confronted the problems of standardized testing for their special students. Special kids know about tests. Tests gave them their labels of "mentally retarded", "learning disabilities", and on. And tests like the MEAP continue to haunt them, designed as they are to separate those on top from those on the bottom. On "MEAP DAY" let's pay attention to the 10% of our schools population, the "special kids", and let's see what happens to them on that day. As it is time for parents to insist on inclusion of their students in schools, so it is time for parents, and others concerned with special kids¹, to insist that schools spend their time and resources on real learning and end this practice of testing that dominates the curriculum and is often yet another tool of humiliation for our children.

MEAP SHRIEKS

The items below were submitted by readers.

Store this in your "how appropriate" folder...I went to use the bathroom at school yesterday. I decided to opt for the premium staff-only men's room in the office. I had a little trouble getting in though, as the door would only open up enough to squeeze myself in. You see, it seems the room was selected as the storage sight for the cart containing the MEAP tests.

A State of Michigan Consultant invites teachers to "Learn strategies that guide students to think like the MEAP."

Another State of Michigan Consultant advises teachers to teach within the boundaries of the objectives and the kids will score well on the social studies MEAP.

In a meeting with a decision-maker, he/she said that "We have to let parents know how important we think the [MEAP] test is." Only to subsequently say "legitimacy is real low key around here these days." Later in the school year, this same person said that "it may be very helpful for us to get it early and look at it (in reference to the MEAP booklets)."

"Given the newness of the social studies test, and the fact that schools are just beginning to develop a comprehensive social studies curriculum, I'm confident that these scores will rise with each passing year," state superintendent Arthur Ellis said. *Comment- If they are beginning to develop a social studies program, what have they been doing or teach for the past 60 years or so?*

My fourth grade nephew stayed awake "all night" worrying about his inability to understand "opportunity cost" which is an elementary state objective to be assessed on the MEAP. He was extremely frustrated that he did not know what it was and turned that frustration against himself. He eventually found out what it was and I think that he is now prepared to make investments in Pokeman Cards. Of course I told his mother to opt him out of the stupid test that is driving teachers to teach this "crap." Her main concern was to not isolate her child and imply that he might be too stupid to take the test. I told her that there were probably many parents who struggled with the same social studies question on opportunity cost and she should seek one of these parents out and have that parent opt his/her child out of the test too and my nephew would not feel isolated. This little story really personalized it for me and revealed concerns that parents may have in taking the opt out step.

The Story of Nata

The first thing I remember about meeting Nata is when our principal asked me if he could take World Cultures with me since he and his regular teacher, weren't getting along; (the reason for this is that, though not the ringleader, he was involved in stealing her car last year, joy riding with some of his friends and then abandoning it about a mile from campus).

When he came into the room it was March or April. I had no idea what he could do academically so I asked him to look at Hispanics in American History (a workbook used at the junior high level in our district with reading and writing on each page) to see if he could read it. He said "yes," but when I went to check, much of what was done was wrong or incomplete. Also, his handwriting was very awkward, slanting in many different directions at once and a combination of print and cursive.

I really didn't know what to make of him--he's a very handsome 16 year old from El Salvador with a beautiful smile, who seems to deal with mechanical things magically: he was able to hook up my telephone answering machine, set the time, make a message and check it quickly and efficiently. He seemed to be incredibly bright and really listens well. Whenever we talk, he remembers every little thing and reminds me saying, "I thought you said..."; he also asks a lot of really good questions. He's quite adept at using computers, and, as I was soon to find out, he's also very good with a video camera; he became our high school's "official" photographer and recorded the senior prom and graduation, and did a great job, too. I wondered why a young man of his age--16 going to be 17 in June--was in the 9th grade and failing most classes.

Once we became better acquainted I asked him if he would write down his school history, and he did, though very simplistically. He used a vocabulary that was devoid of any "big" words, and he used only very simple sentences. By reading his narrative I learned that he moved around a lot during his junior high years, changing schools mainly because of fights, and it was only because of a caring "padre" from a local church, that he was even in school today. It's sad that this man who made such an impact on him was transferred to Los Angeles.

Little by little, Nata became more and more a part of our Learning Center, (I am the high school's Resource Specialist and work with students labeled "Learning Disabled." I run a Learning Center, which is in the old school library. The shelves are lined with thousands of books I've purchased over the years, the tables have green tops and the chairs are made of oak--don't ask how I managed to find them!--and there are lots of computers for word processing which are available to anyone who needs to use them); pretty soon he stopped going to his other classes. In a sense, it didn't matter since he was failing most of them anyway--except for the one he attended--and began asking for assignments from me. Soon thereafter, he asked me how students got into my program and I tried to explain it to him.

This is hard to do because there's such a lot of humiliation involved for the "victims," but I said I'd try, and this is pretty much what I told him.

What often happens is a fairly predictable sequence:

*a child starts to fail and fall behind in school; this can go on for many years;

*frequently the child is told he (or she, though the vast majority of these cases are male) is lazy and just needs to try harder;

*he becomes a behavior problem and may even start to cut classes, and get "F's" on his report card,

*then someone says something--a parent complains or a teacher brings up the student's name at a staff meeting, or the principal gets frustrated because the student gets too many referrals or may even do something that requires suspension--and

*then the Student Study Team is supposed to have a meeting and see what's going on.

Because our school is so small (only 100 students), after a consultation with the teacher and parent and the principal, and a look at the CUM folder, which has all of that student's school records, a decision is often made to test the student to see if perhaps there's a learning disability.

Of course I have my own theory about the kind of behavior I've just described; I think it's what Herb Kohl describes in his book: I Won't Learn from You, and other ideas of creative maladjustment. I believe that children have few avenues open to them if they don't like the school they're in, and any action other than refusing to attend involves some form of civil disobedience. For most of us, schools are hard places to be; they are full of rules that we don't like to follow or enforce--the "we" excludes those administrators who love being in a position of authority. Sure, their trains run on time, but where are they taking the children?

The options for civil disobedience include not learning, not completing assignments, copying, lying, being disruptive, cutting class, etc. In addition to the general feeling of distaste for school that many of us have, children who are not part of the "mainstream"--i.e., not white middle class--have an additional burden. They are often invisible or demeaned and dismissed. Just look through any school book--not any book in a room, but those on the "approved" lists--and count how many women, gays and lesbians, Moslems, disabled, Native Americans, eyeglass wearers, people of color, young people, non-European immigrants or workers are featured, or even visible! We might as well advertise: "If you're on the above list, we don't want you, see you, value you or care about you!"

One way for me to contradict the inevitable feeling of hopelessness and impotence is to pay a lot of non-stop attention to my students. I call them at home, I go over to them at their seats, I am physical with them, and always put my hand on their shoulders when working with them, I call their parents and say wonderful things about them, I tear out any articles from newspapers which might have any bearing on their lives, I bring in books I've bought and people I've met, including celebrities, to hang out with them and show them that they ARE important. Inevitably, there's a change, but depending upon the amount of damage, how long it's been there, and what the student's current life looks like, this can take a long time. The trick though, is to outlast them, and I do. I can easily wait years and years, and they know it, because they stay in touch, even those who leave our school, come back to ask me for a recommendation to college. Now, back to Nata...

I tell Nata there are three kinds of tests that are used to determine if a student has a "learning disability":

*first, the psychologist will test you just to be sure that your intelligence is intact--that you think well, which you know you do; and

* then, I will give you some tests to see how well you do in school subjects like reading, writing, spelling and math. Of course, if you're being referred to this program, you won't do well on whichever of these tests give you problems; and

*finally, the psychologist and I will give you some tests to see how you process information, so we can find out where there is a problem. (processing means what your brain does with what it sees and hears before it responds.)

Assuming your intelligence to be as good as mine or anyone else who's walking around the streets--and we know yours is--schools think you should be able to do the work you're assigned, and move from grade to grade, passing all of your classes; however, if you can't, and if we can show that the reason seems to be that you have difficulty processing information--taking the information in and thinking about it and then responding--then we'd say you had a "learning disability" and you would qualify for the program. We would then modify your assignments so you could do well in school because the law says it's not fair to penalize you for your disability. It's kind of like allowing a blind person to use a tape recorder or Braille. We don't punish them or say, "Because you're blind we won't help you." The opposite--we do everything we can to help you access information and get out your thinking so that others can respond to it.

If you look at the students in the Learning Center, you have seen that each of them is very smart, but you also have noticed that each of them has some challenge--some area that's a struggle for them--and you probably also notice that I push them, that I encourage them to struggle, and that eventually, when they believe what I tell them, when they "get it" that they're really brilliant, then they need me less and less. So, Nata, that's how these students got to be in my program ...someone noticed that they were smart but that they weren't doing well in school and suggested that they be tested.

That's when he said he wanted to see if he had a "Learning Disability." I was somewhat surprised because I thought his "problems" had more to do with one of several other things:

- * his language--he's from El Salvador and Spanish is his first language; in fact, I often use Spanish to be sure he understands me--
- * his attendance--he was absent more often than he was present, and
- * his attitude--he hung out with a group of students who were considered troublemakers by the rest of the staff. (Being in a room somewhat away from the rest of the campus has a side benefit: I often haven't heard the "gossip" about all of the students who are causing their teachers problems, and so have no reason to be prejudiced against them).

I explained that his mom would have to sign some papers giving me permission to test him. He asked me to talk with her and I did that very night. She came in the next day and, after hearing about the program, requested that he be tested.

The funny thing about this label is that it's invisible, so it's impossible to tell when someone has this "condition." Of course, in my humble opinion, there's really no such thing as a "learning disability" anyway, just a situation where some people have internalized the notion that they aren't smart, or that they can't learn math or a foreign language, or whatever. In fact, the more that teachers believe that they can't do something, (like learning to swim or dance or sing or use a computer), the more readily they are willing to accept that some of their students can't learn something either. Luckily, though I was unintentionally "harmed" by my parents, it wasn't in the area of my intelligence; they never gave me any hint that I wasn't smart, so I've never doubted my intellect nor that of my so called "special ed" kids.

Of course if schools would just help the students who needed help--and don't get me started on what I think the schools SHOULD be doing--whatever that entailed, there'd be no need for special education, no reason for students to first become humiliated and defeated before they were allowed to get some extra

time on a test. What craziness! Did anyone ever snatch your morning paper before you were done? or turn off the shower in mid-stream, or tell you that you were spending too much time playing with your kids or with the dog? Then why tell school children that if they don't finish something in time they'll fail? Why do we need a system of winners and losers? and why is it that the winners are always related to the rulers?

In fact, if the schools would just have more people who just wanted to support the kids, there'd be less money and paperwork--oh! the trees they use!--and less time wasted, and we could just spend our time being supportive and the kids could just spend their time learning.

Why do I say this? Because, after teaching labeled students for more than 30 years, in New York, California and Israel, I can tell you that far too many of these "LD" kids go on to complete college and have good lives for me to believe that test scores mean anything more than how much money their father makes. In fact, these "LD" students are totally indistinguishable from their peers, except that maybe, after years of being told they are brilliant and capable, and future leaders, they just may have more confidence than their peers.

Getting back to Nata...here was a 16 year 10 month old immigrant youth with poor attendance and low academic skills who had dropped out of school in junior high, now asking me to see if perhaps the reason for all of his difficulties might not simply be that he had a processing problem. It seemed reasonable to me, so after his mom signed the papers, I contacted the psychologist and we began the assessment process. I also asked his mom to take him for a bilingual assessment at the district office.

I alerted the teachers that we'd need to have Nata with us for testing; his English and Math teachers had already agreed that he could stay with me, I was teaching him World Cultures, and his first period teacher always complained that he was late and never did any work anyway, so he effectively moved into my room. By now it was May.

His work improved somewhat and I began to try giving him books to read. He discovered Gary Soto, a local author who is very popular and writes about growing up as a Latino--or is it Hispanic? I can't keep track of which term is more "pc" or who it is that I may be offending. I asked Nata to write what it was that he liked about these books, and he really did a good job; he wrote how the author described some people listening to the same music that his parents listened to. Now he was also doing some math in my room and I even got him to complete and turn in an assignment for his Science teacher, which pleased her because it was the first time he'd ever done that.

By now the testing was almost done, and the psychologist and I compared notes as we always do, so that our paperwork would match--(gotta keep those bureaucrats happy). I went to her and showed her my results and they were about what you'd expect: low academic scores across the board and the evidence of a processing problem. The way this was determined was fairly straightforward: he was give basically the same "test" four times:

*first, a word or phrase is either said or held up on a card, then

*he was told to look at the card or listen to the word(s), wait, and

*after a few seconds, he was either find the word on the line among five options if he were being tested solely for auditory or visual memory, or asked to write it down on the page if he were being tested for auditory or visual memory combined with writing.

It was no surprise to me that he got 100% correct on the tests of auditory and visual memory yet only about half right when asked to write down what he remembered. These results, combined with an "average" IQ and low academic scores would make him a shoo-in for the program, but the psychologist's results did not bode well for Nata: she found him to be "borderline," a euphemism for retarded, and nothing I could say would make her change her mind. Being "borderline" would not qualify him for the program, since there was no "discrepancy" between his achievement and his supposed "ability."

I tried explaining that the district's own bilingual tests showed that he was more comfortable and knowledgeable in Spanish, so perhaps that explained his low scores, and I suggested that we use the district's Spanish assessor, but she disagreed, saying that he was so old, nearly 17, that he was a "lost cause," and that her results were probably true anyway. I also offered to use a procedure that I often use in private practice called the LPAD, an assessment of Learning Potential, so she could see that he clearly was NOT retarded, but she didn't agree to that either. I really was adamant that Nata was far from slow, and finally convinced her to look at her results again.

She finally found something--some sub-test--that allowed us to qualify him, but by this time much damage was done. Some of the staff at school had heard us disagreeing and two teachers said to me in anger that I had made the psychologist falsify scores just so I could get Nata into the program, and one even wrote a scathing attack on my professionalism. Even the principal, who really likes Nata and respects me, was totally confounded by the process, and didn't understand what we were arguing about and how he qualified for special education services.

Actually, it is my strong belief that psychologists would do a lot more good in our district if they spent more time listening to our youngsters than testing them. It's obvious that the students are all bright, and should be treated accordingly. I can't tell you the number of times a student of mine with an IQ in the low 60's or with the words 'retarded' or 'borderline' in their files went on to graduate go on to college and have a great life. How dare we assume that these tests reveal any more than they do, which is simply how a frightened child performs on a "white middle class test" usually with a "white middle class" psychologist, who isn't interested in finding out how the child learns by actually trying to work with them, as in a DYNAMIC assessment; rather they are interested in a snapshot--rather than a video--of this young person, which could affect him or her for the rest of their lives!

Now back to Nata. OK, so we had the IEP meeting, all the while the psychologist worrying that the district could reverse the process because of his scores. Only one teacher came to the meeting, and that was his former English teacher who had given him an "F" for the year.

We took him into the program and now he was "mine," so I proceeded to do as I always do. I told him to "come to school on time, take home books to read, watch PBS, do your homework, eat healthy foods, brush and floss your teeth, etc., etc." He actually did manage to pass my class and the other one that he liked, but failed the rest. Our school counselor arranged for him to take some Independent Study Summer School classes so that he'd start to accumulate credits and have a fighting chance to graduate before the age of 50. He went, along with three of my other Resource Specialist students. We thought this would be a better alternative than sending them to regular summer school where they'd be in a class of 20 or 30 with one teacher who probably wouldn't know how to help "special ed" kids. Here, all they had to do was the assignments we'd agreed upon and show them to the teacher once a week.

I am proud to say that all four of them got "C" grades for REGULAR English and an "A's" in Citizenship--the teacher, who was really wonderful, told me that they were very well behaved. I was impressed. Nata got a "C" in the same regular English that he'd just failed! I was out of town, but he called the day I

returned to share the good news with me, and told me that he was planning to get straight A's once we went back to school.

Since then, I've seen him a few times this summer, and I must say that he seems like a different person: he has a job in the city which he enjoys immensely, in a wonderful place that's very high tech and designed for young people; I think he's taking visitors on tours and explaining how cameras and computers work. But the biggest news, for me, is that he's now reading--and enjoying!!!--a book of mine, actually one of my favorites, The Book of Embraces by Eduardo Galeano--not what anyone would have expected from a "borderline" teenager who failed most of his classes! I am so pleased. How dare the psychologist and those teachers think I manipulated the scores! If he's "borderline," (a euphemism for retarded) then so am I!

Update: January, 2000

Nata and another student of mine just finished (and passed) a class in "American Labor History" at our local Community College, and both have signed up for more classes this semester; two more Learning Disabled students are joining them. This is significant, because they are the only students at our school who are taking advantage of the concurrent enrollment policy. Nata is still reading Galeano and just recently showed me a poem in a book by Luis Rodriguez which is dedicated to Galeano. (He found it in a book he'd requested from our local library when he was looking for another book to read by Rodriguez who'd written Always Running/La Vida Loco). I'd say that this young man is on his way, and no thanks to standardized IQ tests!

Standards and High Stakes Testing:
*the dark side of a generation of
political, economic and social neglect
of public education*

by Perry Marker

"In the generation that immediately followed World War II, California was widely regarded as both model and magnet for the nation - in its economic opportunities, social outlook, and high quality public services and institutions. With a nearly free and universally accessible system of higher education, a well supported public school system, and a wide array of social services, and human rights guarantees that had no parallel in any other state."

-- Peter Schrag, *Paradise Lost, California's Experience, America's Future*

We blame teachers for the "failure" of the schools. We blame them on a lot of levels. We blame their professional education; we blame what they teach; we blame how they teach. The simplistic, and punitive reform efforts regarding standards and high stakes testing reflect the fact that teachers have been blamed for all that is wrong with education, and students are being punished for it.

The passage of Proposition 13 (Jarvis-Gann) is a germane way of dividing the post World War II California, between that postwar exhilaration -- with its huge investment in the public infrastructure era and its strong commitment to the development of quality education systems and other services -- and a generation of declining confidence and shrinking public services (Schrag, pp. 10-11). The squeeze on public services that Proposition 13 brought about came at the time California was experiencing significant demographic change -- moving from a society that thought of itself (albeit incorrectly) mostly as white, middle class, to one in which whites would become another minority. Latinos, Asians, and African Americans now constitute a sizable majority of school enrollment and the use of public services.

Because of the revolt against government taxation that Proposition 13 set in motion, which resulted in the increased use of the initiative process, initiatives-- once a bastion of "the people" and their power to influence public policy -- is now most often used by well organized political and economic entities, on the left and the right, and by incumbent politicians, from the government on down. But, it is still the people of California -- in all their diversity -- that vote on the initiatives that appear on the ballot. However, it is those interest groups backed by media consultants, direct mail specialists, pollsters and others, that usually finance the costly signature drives, running into the millions of dollars, to get measures on the ballot, and the advertising campaigns that drive the support for the initiative, or block the measures of its opponents (Schrag, 1998, p. 11). It is interesting to note that the further the initiative process proceeds, the more problematic effective citizenship becomes. Each initiative moves control, further from the

public - from the legislature to special interests. The non-deliberative quality of the California style initiative is problematic -- no public hearings, no rules of procedure, no formal debates, no informed voice -- and fails to present downside arguments, to outline implications, to ask the cost, and to speak for minorities. Currently, some twenty four states have some form of initiative or referendum in their constitutions. And, there is increasing pressure to use it as an agent of political reform.

During the period of time since Proposition 13, initiatives have been passed that imposed specific spending formulas on schools, abolished affirmative action in public education, denied public schooling and public services to illegal immigrants, and eliminated bilingual education. California's schools, which thirty years ago, had been among the best funded on the planet, are now in the bottom quarter among states in virtually every major indicator. California has an average class size of over 32, and in many cases, over 40 students in classrooms designed for 25. A vast majority of California's educational facilities are at least 20 years old, and many are over 40 years of age, and in various and dangerous states of disrepair. In California, we have chosen to spend less on education and more on prisons, and we are currently 41st out of 50 states in per capita educational spending. During the past twenty-five years, the best educational system in the world has been fundamentally and systematically dismantled.

Lost in this reality of initiatives, budget cuts and decline of funding, is the fact that despite what politicians and the popular press would like us to believe, during the last decade standardized scores have been holding relatively steady; with modest increases in both math and reading scores (Berliner and Biddle, 1998). The most recent reading report on the National Assessment of Education Progress for tests administered in 1992, 1994, and 1998, reflect the steady state of reading scores. Scores from 1998 are equal to, or slightly above, 1992 scores for all tested grades (Berliner and Biddle, 1998).

In the most recent international comparison United States nine year olds were second only to Finland's nine year olds, and United States' fourteen year olds finished ninth, well above average and a few points from the top (Bracy, 1992). This despite the fact that more students are taking the tests than ever before whose first language is not English. Berliner and Biddle conclude that there is no support for the myth that American students fail in reading achievement, *or any other subject*. Simply put, schools are in better shape than we are led to believe. Teachers have done incredible work despite that fact that the educational system in California, and some other states, has been crumbling around them.

Since teachers have become convenient scapegoats for all that is wrong with education, we also have turned our attention to students and punished them through the introduction of plethora of standards and high stakes testing proposals: a racist, one-size-fits-all approach that is designed to present a singular and simplistic view of knowledge, truth and learning which ignores the diverse needs of our children of color and those who live in poverty. These so called "reform" efforts in education are intended to blame teachers and punish students for the problems of education by mandating a focus on drill and practice, and "teaching to the test," instead of fostering students' critical thinking skills. With these efforts to blame teachers and punish students, we are relinquishing control of the classroom and curriculum solely to those who construct the tests. Martha Ruddell (in press) quotes Elliot Eisner who "reminds us that standards in education are not new; they are in fact a 'recapitulation' of behavioral objectives that so preoccupied us in the 1960's, and actually grew from the 'efficiency' movement in education of 1913-1930 that was based on an industrial model of high productivity." Ruddell goes on to further quote Eisner:

"Uniformity in curriculum content is a virtue if one's aim is to be able to compare students in one part of the country with students in others. Uniformity is a virtue when the aspiration is to compare the performance of American Students with students in Korea, Japan, and Germany. But why should we wish to make such comparisons?" (p.11)

Susan Ohanian (in Ruddell, in press) notes that framers of standards regularly ignore the developmental reality of adolescence. She says:

"Now you and I know that anyone who says high schoolers should read Moby Dick 1) doesn't know any fifteen year olds; 2) has never read Moby Dick or 3) has read Moby Dick, has a fifteen year old in the house, and wants to get even" (p. 12)

Perhaps the most astounding thing about standards and high stakes tests is the there is no research evidence whatsoever that their use enhances student achievement and learning (Black and Wilam, 1998). Still, tests have become so all consuming that more than 20 million school days were devoted to them in one year. The case for high stakes testing and standards is based on simplistic solutions designed to raise the self esteem of politicians and policy makers, and maintain a classist system of education where a small and select number of schools receive an embarrassment of riches.

Our fixation on standards and high stakes testing was recently demonstrated when, the day after the tragic killings in Littleton, Colorado, high schools continued their scheduled standardized tests, rather than postpone them and discuss the incomprehensible events that shocked students and adults alike. I wonder how high the scores will be on that day of testing? Will teachers be blamed, yet again?

Things are bound to only get worse with standards and high stakes testing. Schools will be compared to one another regarding how well they do on the tests. Teachers may be subjected to disciplinary pressures, even firing, if their students don't score well on one test. Schools will lose funding or may even be closed. More importantly, students of color and children in poverty will get an education that doesn't even begin to compare to that received with wealthier, white students. And, this doesn't even consider the little mentioned fact that these tests cost big money. The National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (1990) says that as early as 1990 standardized testing in America consumed more than \$900 million in one year. No doubt the price tag is currently much, much higher.

The current wave of high stakes, standardized tests are punitive and neglect the notion that assessment should serve the primary purpose of improving student learning. We need be working with teachers to expand the idea of assessment; to provide different, yet rigorous, ways for students to demonstrate what they know. We can develop demanding and yet inclusive proficiency exit standards that combine student portfolios, and performance exams - not just one high stakes standardized test - to graduate.

Assessments should serve to determine the success of a program, provide information to parents on their child's achievement, and hold schools accountable for how well taxpayers' money is being spent. It's time to demand that our school boards stop relying on a single, standardized, measure of student achievement and adopt a variety of student assessments that:

are designed to provide feedback that improves student learning;

involve parents, teachers and the community collaborating for improved student learning and better schools;

allow a variety of measures that focus on individual student learning;

do not limit the curriculum to a singular, standardized, assessment based on a high stakes approach.

We need to stop blaming teachers and punishing students for the educational politics of neglect during the last two decades in California, and across the nation. If the last twenty five years are any indicator, politicians do not have the solutions to the education reform. Let's demand that those who are most invested in education -- families and teachers -- have a voice in determining the course of educational reform. Isn't the education of our children is far too important to reduce it to a high stakes game of testing roulette?

California has been described as the nation's bellwether. The place where the future is on display. California and the nation faces the ultimate test of whether an increasingly diverse nation -- currently being transformed through the diversity that immigration brings with it -- can use diversity as a positive effect, or whether under such conditions, it can successfully remain, and govern itself, as a democratic republic.

Whether or not it is agreed that any state or region is or should be a symbol of the future it is certain that -- if the last twenty five years are an indication -- California, has so far failed to combine assurances of economic and educational opportunity, and the good life for all of its diverse citizenry. The so called reform efforts of standards and high stakes testing in education is an example of California's and the nation's failure, while tending to blame teachers and punish students for the short-sighted economic policies of the last two decades. It is the failure of the California leadership to invest in generation after generation of school children for over twenty five years that has brought us to the brink, not a failure of our teachers or students.

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Appendix I

Propositions since 1978 That Have Passed Related to or Directly Impacting Education

Propositions Since 1978 That Have Passed Related to or Impacting Education

Proposition 13 (1978) - Jarvis Gann - property tax limits

Proposition 37 (1984) - California Lottery Initiative - funds from lottery directly to education

Proposition 63 (1986) - English as Official Language - Made English the State's official language (never fully implemented)

Proposition 98 (1988) - Minimum State Spending on Education - Guaranteed that 40% of state's general fund each year be devoted to public schools and community colleges.

Proposition 184 (1994) - Three Strikes Initiative - Mandatory 25-life sentences for anyone convicted of a third felony; led to massive discretionary funds for prisons and pitted prisons vs. higher education

Proposition 187 (1994) - Save Our Schools - Barred illegal immigrants from public schools and all but emergency health services; subsequently overturned in 1999.

Proposition 209 (1996) - California Civil Rights Initiative - Prohibits all race and gender based preferences for, or discrimination against, individuals or groups in California public education, contracting and employment.

Proposition 218 (1996) - The Right to Vote on Taxes Initiative - No local tax, no fee, or assessment -none- was permissible without a vote of the affected property owners, and property owners only; in some instances it required a vote of the general electorate. No charge of any sort that benefited certain properties (e.g. better lights, sidewalks, parks) could be levied without an engineer's analysis indicating that the properties on which charges fell would actually benefit in proportion to the charges. The more valuable the property the more votes the owner has.

Proposition 227 (1998) - English Language in Public Schools (Unz Initiative) - All instruction in public school must be in English

**I participate.
You participate.
He, she, or they participate.
We all participate.**

They profit.

But things change.
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**June 26-28, 1999
Conference at Wayne State University**



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School reform requires social and economic justice
<http://www.coe.wayne.edu/CommunityBuilding/WSSIRF.html>