Evaluating Editorials

Read the opinion pieces handed out, and on a separate sheet of paper answer the following question for each one:

1. Circle all the words or phrases that represent facts in the piece; underline those that are the opinions.

2. Which are there more of?

3. What is the opinion of the writer that he or she is trying to persuade the reader to believe?

4. A. What is the opposite opinion of the writer, the one he disagrees with?

   B. Is this mentioned in the essay and does the writer try to discredit this opinion? Or is it implied? Explain.

5. How does the writer try to convince the reader?
   A. Does the writer use appeals to reason? Explain.

   B. Does the writer use appeals to emotions? Explain.

6. What background details does the writer include?

7. A. Did you learn something from reading this commentary?

   B. Did you change your mind because of reading it or did you come away unconvinced? Explain.

8. How well-written is this commentary, whether you agree with it or not? Explain.

9. Though the last two editorials are written on the same topic, which editorial is better? Why?
For once, blame the student

By Patrick Welsh, USA Today March 7, 2006

Failure in the classroom is often tied to lack of funding, poor teachers or other ills. Here's a thought: Maybe it's the failed work ethic of today's kids. That's what I'm seeing in my school. Until reformers see this reality, little will change.

Last month, as I averaged the second-quarter grades for my senior English classes at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., the same familiar pattern leapt out at me.

Kids who had emigrated from foreign countries — such as Shewit Giovanni from Ethiopia, Farah Ali from Guyana and Edgar Awumey from Ghana — often aced every test, while many of their U.S.-born classmates from upper-class homes with highly educated parents had a string of C's and D's.

As one would expect, the middle-class American kids usually had higher SAT verbal scores than did their immigrant classmates, many of whom had only been speaking English for a few years.

What many of the American kids I taught did not have was the motivation, self-discipline or work ethic of the foreign-born kids.

Politicians and education bureaucrats can talk all they want about reform, but until the work ethic of U.S. students changes, until they are willing to put in the time and effort to master their subjects, little will change.

A study released in December by University of Pennsylvania researchers Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman suggests that the reason so many U.S. students are "falling short of their intellectual potential" is not "inadequate teachers, boring textbooks and large class sizes" and the rest of the usual litany cited by the so-called reformers — but "their failure to exercise self-discipline."

The sad fact is that in the USA, hard work on the part of students is no longer seen as a key factor in academic success. The groundbreaking work of Harold Stevenson and a multinational team at the University of Michigan comparing attitudes of Asian and American students sounded the alarm more than a decade ago.

Asian vs. U.S. students

When asked to identify the most important factors in their performance in math, the percentage of Japanese and Taiwanese students who answered "studying hard" was twice that of American students.

American students named native intelligence, and some said the home environment. But a clear majority of U.S. students put the responsibility on their teachers. A good teacher, they said, was the determining factor in how well they did in math.

"Kids have convinced parents that it is the teacher or the system that is the problem, not their own lack of effort," says Dave Roscher, a chemistry teacher at T.C. Williams in this Washington suburb. "In my day, parents didn't listen when kids complained about teachers. We are supposed to miraculously make kids learn even though they are not working."
As my colleague Ed Cannon puts it: "Today, the teacher is supposed to be responsible for motivating the kid. If they don't learn it is supposed to be our problem, not theirs."

And, of course, busy parents guilt-ridden over the little time they spend with their kids are big subscribers to this theory.

Maybe every generation of kids has wanted to take it easy, but until the past few decades students were not allowed to get away with it. "Nowadays, it's the kids who have the power. When they don't do the work and get lower grades, they scream and yell. Parents side with the kids who pressure teachers to lower standards," says Joel Kaplan, another chemistry teacher at T.C. Williams.

Every year, I have had parents come in to argue about the grades I have given in my AP English classes. To me, my grades are far too generous; to middle-class parents, they are often an affront to their sense of entitlement. If their kids do a modicum of work, many parents expect them to get at least a B. When I have given C's or D's to bright middle-class kids who have done poor or mediocre work, some parents have accused me of destroying their children's futures.

It is not only parents, however, who are siding with students in their attempts to get out of hard work.

**Blame schools, too**

"Schools play into it," says psychiatrist Lawrence Brain, who counsels affluent teenagers throughout the Washington metropolitan area. "I've been amazed to see how easy it is for kids in public schools to manipulate guidance counselors to get them out of classes they don't like. They have been sent a message that they don't have to struggle to achieve if things are not perfect."

Neither the high-stakes state exams, such as Virginia's Standards of Learning, nor the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act have succeeded in changing that message; both have turned into minimum-competency requirements aimed at the lowest in our school.

Colleges keep complaining that students are coming to them unprepared. Instead of raising admissions standards, however, they keep accepting mediocre students lest cuts have to be made in faculty and administration.

As a teacher, I don't object to the heightened standards required of educators in the No Child Left Behind law. Who among us would say we couldn't do a little better? Nonetheless, teachers have no control over student motivation and ambition, which have to come from the home — and from within each student.

Perhaps the best lesson I can pass along to my upper- and middle-class students is to merely point them in the direction of their foreign-born classmates, who can remind us all that education in America is still more a privilege than a right.

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Editorial: **Detroit should use Washington, D.C., example in fixing abysmal test scores**

**THE DETROIT NEWS**

New student test scores released Tuesday show Detroit children -- already among America's lowest-performing students -- are performing even more poorly. State and local educational leaders should use these devastating results as an opportunity to follow the lead of dramatic educational changes in Washington, D.C.

Never before have students anywhere done so badly in the 40-year history of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It's the only nationally representative assessment of American students, allowing the comparison of states' and many big cities' student achievement.

Skillman Foundation President Carol Goss called the results an "academic catastrophe."

For fourth-grade math, Detroit's score was the lowest among big cities and far lower than what experts had anticipated. The average U.S. score was 239. For large cities, it was 231. Detroit's score was 200. For eighth-grade math, the city's score was a similarly appalling big city worst.

Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb vows to use the dismal scores as leverage to accelerate the pace of reform. Teachers, parents and the community should accept the results for what they are -- a total failure of the school district -- and commit to doing everything necessary to improve them.

Washington, D.C., provides a model. The city's mayor took over the public schools from the school board and hired highly effective leader Michelle Rhee, who has enacted rigorous accountability measures to improve instructional quality and school management.

Under Rhee, every educator is on a performance contract.

Her changes are paying off. Washington's new NAEP scores show the city made the largest gains of any urban system at the fourth-grade level during the past two years.

"Detroit is where D.C. was just a few years ago," says Sharif Shakrani, co-director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. "It should follow D.C.'s lead."

That means Detroit voters need to give Mayor Dave Bing the power to oversee the city's public schools, plus provide Bobb with the clear legal authority to make academic reforms.

And parents and Detroit Federation of Teachers union members need to support both the proposed new teacher contract and a rigorous new evaluation system, which the district would create in January if the contract is approved this month.

As Bobb observed, the NAEP results show that the adults in the system have failed the children. The system needs to respond by learning from a school district that is making solid progress in tackling similar problems.

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Rescue Detroit's children
Failing test scores must galvanize action

Detroit has no future, if this is allowed to stand.

Southeast Michigan has no future, if this is allowed to stand.

Test results released Tuesday by the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveal a far worse picture of Detroit Public Schools than we've ever been led to imagine. These results should be an alarm of desperation, no different from the poor, battered souls who cried out from the ravaged Superdome after Hurricane Katrina: "We need help -- now!"

That's the cry emanating from Detroit children whose schools have failed to equip them with the rudimentary skills necessary for even the most menial jobs. That cry is rising from kids who have watched as decade after decade of educational failure has been met with excuses and the occasional assignment of blame, but never with concerted remedial action.

Detroit's math NAEP scores are officially the worst ever in the 40-year history of the test. And there's more bad news on the way. DPS officials expect that marks on the NAEP reading and science tests, to be released next spring, will be similarly pitiful.

All of these deficiencies point to a similar problem: an epidemic of illiteracy that has plagued the district for years. Children who don't read can't perform the kind of problem-solving computations that appear on the NAEP math test any better than they can answer the questions on the reading component. And because reading skills are so low in Detroit's schools, many of the city's kids never really had a chance on the national tests.

Think of how remarkable that makes the achievements of those who do thrive in Detroit's schools -- the many who go on to college, on to lives of great success. But also think of the lost opportunity, the children whose educations have prepared them for nothing more than lives spent in pursuit of criminal aims or sponging off the state's safety net.

That's why this is a regional and statewide problem, as potent to people in Bloomfield, Inkster or Ishpeming as it is in Detroit. The city is still this area's core, and the state's largest population center. It's the cultural heart of Southeast Michigan, and one of the most important economic drivers statewide. As its schools mass-produce citizens who can't contribute to the state's fortunes, it will continue to be a drain on everyone's resources. If Detroit, the heart of this region and state, is allowed to die, there's no hope for the extremities that depend on its vitality.

There is no future for Detroit, if this is allowed to stand.

There is no future for Southeast Michigan, if this is allowed to stand.
The scenario is alarming, but we don't have to let it be paralyzing.

This can be a call to action, a clarion to marshal every available resource to defeat illiteracy in Detroit's public schools, and right the wrongs that are being perpetrated against the city's children. Already, Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb has assembled a team of strong academic advisers to devise a plan. They'll have a curriculum and support structure in place by the end of the school year.

But they need help. Everyone's.

Today, this newspaper calls upon the many employers, professional associations, civic groups, churches and nonprofits that have long done good deeds in our city to rally around this single cause.

The Free Press will commit to doing its part, including:

• Enlisting the nation's foremost experts on reading and literacy to help fashion a region-wide strategy for aiding Bobb in his efforts to ensure that every student in DPS is reading at or above grade-level by 2015. Bobb has suggested a local Reading Corps of trained volunteers, fashioned along the lines of the Peace Corps, to fan out across the district to aid teachers in classrooms.

• Spreading the word, supporting and participating in any volunteer program that the district might fashion to help students read better. Bobb has suggested a local Reading Corps of trained volunteers, fashioned along the lines of the Peace Corps, to fan out across the district to aid teachers in classrooms.

• Reporting on what other large cities beset by poverty and shrinking resources have done to dramatically increase literacy in their own school districts, publishing the results of that inquiry, and pressing this region's elected leaders to emulate the best practices we discover.

• Chronicling progress as it unfolds, and advocating strongly for the effort to maintain its focus, and fervency, as it progresses.

We can and should agree that Detroit is ground zero in this cause.

Let our efforts begin here and now. But then let's ask the corps to move out to where other help is needed, where other school districts struggle to produce the generations of bright minds that Michigan needs now more than ever.

Through these efforts, we can build a new base of hope in all our schools, a new standard of education, so that this region can be what it deserves to be, what it should be.

A place of greatness.