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*Ethical Journalism: A Handbook of Values and Practices for News and Editorial Departments*  
New York Times, September 2004, paragraph 18.

Dear Public Editor,

The *New York Times* must fire Brent Staples.

It is true that 2 of the 4 pieces I will be citing are unsigned editorials, but they bear the stamp of Mr. Staples' rhetoric. Should it turn out that he did not write them, then there are two people who should be removed. The four essays are treated in chronological order.

#### THE APRIL 18, 2005 EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Brent Staples is to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) what Judith Miller was to weapons of mass destruction (and No Child Left Behind is to public education what Katrina was to New Orleans). A Miller hyped WMD in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, Staples has hyped NCLB as a "law that could potentially surpass *Brown v. Board of Education* in terms of widening access to high-quality public education." In fact, NCLB is itself a weapon of mass destruction. Target: public education. What else can one make of a law that by 2014 will fail 99% of California's schools and will fail, on average, 95% of schools in six Great Lakes states and that funnels billions of dollars through public schools and into private coffers? (Sources: Source: Payne, Gavin, "The Implementation of the Accountability Provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act: A State Perspective." Presentation to the Center on Education Policy's Forum on NCLB Accountability, Washington, D.C., July 28, 2004; Wiley, Edward W., Mathis William J., and Garcia, David R., *The Impact of the Adequate Yearly Progress Requirement of the Federal "No Child Left Behind" Act on Schools in the Great Lakes Region*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University, Report No. EPSL-0509-109-EPRU, September, 2005; Bracey, Gerald W. *No Child Left Behind: Where Does the Money Go?* Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University, Report No. EPSL-0506-114-EPRU, June, 2005).

#### THE SEPTEMBER 6 EDITORIAL

In a September 6, 2005 editorial, "Back to School, Thinking Globally," Staples claims to present and refute three myths.

"Worst of all, they (American students) fall further and further behind their peers abroad the longer they stay in school." This is not true but far too complex to detail here. I refer readers to my article in the May, 2000 issue of *Educational Researcher* for that

exposition (Bracey, Gerald W. “The Third International Mathematics and Science Study and Report: A Critique.” *Educational Researcher*, May, 2000).

“A second myth—that America’s white elite children compare favorably with those abroad is also false. In the most recent international data comparing students in the top 5 percent in terms of achievement, the United States ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 29.”

What does he mean by “white elite?” Not exactly a term reeking of precision and it’s not what his ranking refers to, a ranking in which he specifies neither the study nor the grade nor the subject matter. There are many studies. Mr. Staples has obviously chosen a statistic that he thinks will help him make his point. He is also choosing the metric that creates the biggest differences among people or among countries—ranks. When they run the 100 meter dash in the Olympics, someone *must* rank last. He is still the 8<sup>th</sup> fastest human being on the planet that day.

From what I can tell, Mr. Staples is looking at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentiles from PISA—Program of International Student Assessment run by OECD. The 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for the U. S. is a score of 638. The average for all 29 OECD nations in the study is 660. Is that an important difference? I’m not certain but it is the case the American high scorers don’t score as high as high scorers in most other nations. That’s not true in a number of other studies that Mr. Staples didn’t report. PISA is not the only study, and is not even, as Mr. Staples claims, “the most recent.” More importantly, no one really knows what PISA measures. I’ll be happy to discuss this with anyone who wants further information.

Let’s take the Trends<sup>1</sup> in International Mathematics and Science Study from 2003. In math, American 8<sup>th</sup> graders overall scored 504, well above the international average of 466. Only 9 of the 44 other nations had statistically significantly higher scores. White 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored 525, higher than the overall U. S. average.

In science, American 8<sup>th</sup> graders were significantly exceeded by only 7 of 44 nations, scoring 527, high above the international average of 473. White 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored 552 (Source: *Highlights From the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, December 2004).

U. S. students typically do best in reading and literacy, a field which Mr. Staples ignores. Consider the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), conducted in 2001 and released in 2003. The 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for the highest scoring nation, Sweden, was 565. America’s 50<sup>th</sup> percentile was 552. Sweden’s 75<sup>th</sup> percentile was 605 and the U. S., 601. Sweden and the U. S. had identical 95<sup>th</sup> percentiles, 663. It has been observed on a number of occasions that American schools’ reading instruction emphasizes literature over extraction of information. In the literary subtest of PIRLS, Sweden’s 50<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> percentiles were 564, 603, and 659, respectively. For the U. S., they were 557, 613,

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<sup>1</sup> When this study was first conducted in 1995 it was called the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS. But, because it was repeated in 1999 and again in 2003, the meaning of the “T” was changed to “Trends.”

and 681—our better and best readers bested the better and best readers in the highest scoring nation overall (Source: *PIRLS 2001 International Report: IEA's Study of Reading Literacy Achievement in Primary Schools, Appendix B*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2003).

Sweden had the highest average (mean) score of 562. American white students scored 565 (Source, *PIRLS 2001*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, [www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/pirlspub/index.asp](http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/pirlspub/index.asp).)

“The third and most common myth—that the nations that do better than us [sic] are ‘homogeneous’ societies—is also not true. Immigration has transformed much of Europe, as it has the United States.” Is he *serious*?

Discounting us as “a nation of immigrants” starting with the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, we have been absorbing large quantities of newcomers since the Irish potato famine of 1845.

In 2002, America contained 37.4 million Latinos and 11.9 million people of Asian ancestry. Adding the 38 million African Americans brings the total to 76.3 million, nearly 30% of the total population—and these are not all of the groups. At the same time, the original 15 members of the European Union housed 382 million persons. Had these American minorities migrated to EU countries and spread themselves proportionately to each country’s size, each nation would have immediately contained at least 20% immigrants not counting whatever percent they already had. Yet the proportion of minorities in France even today is given at only 10%. In Germany it’s about the same and, along with Belgium, these are the most immigrant-heavy nations.

The ten nations that the EU added in May, 2004 house another 74 million people and are hardly immigrant-magnets: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Indeed, many of these countries are immigrant exporters (Sources: Eurostat News Release, August 31 2004; Levine, Robert A. “Assimilating Immigrants: Why American Can and France Cannot.” RAND Occasional Paper OP-132-RC, July, 2004).

The students that most outscore American—and European—students live in Asia, rather xenophobic nations, some of them

He continues: “The nations that have left us behind educationally have a few things in common. They decide at the national level what children should learn and when they should learn it.” An analysis of the top 10 nations in the 41-nation Third International Mathematics and Science Study did find that 8 of them had highly centralized education systems. But so did 9 of the ten *lowest* scoring nations. National curricula and calendars, in and of themselves, appear to count for nothing (Source: Atkin, J. Myron, and Black, Paul, “Policy Perils of International Comparisons: The TIMSS Case.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September, 1997).

## THE OCTOBER 22 EDITORIAL

Then came, “Happy Talk on School Reform,” October 22. Early on, Staples chastises President Bush, saying “he should have reminded the nation that as long as it fails to take school reform seriously, American children will fall further and further behind their peers abroad.” The implication, clearly, is that they have been falling further behind. But they have not. In the three TIMSS studies of 1995, 1999 and 2003, only 3 of the 22 nations that participated all three times had larger gains in math than U. S. 8<sup>th</sup> graders: Hong Kong, Latvia, and Lithuania. Japan and Singapore actually lost ground. This pattern repeated itself in science. Hong Kong is competitive, but it has fewer people than New York City. (Source: *Highlights from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, December, 2004).

## THE NOVEMBER 21 EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Finally, there is the, how shall we say--astonishing?--“observer” piece from November 21, “Why the United States Should Look to Japan for Better Schools.” It is not an “observation;” it is a rant.

Look to *Japan*? That was foolish when it was popular in the 1980’s when many Japanese believed that the Emperor’s palace and grounds were more valuable than the entire state of California (high math test scores obviously do not prevent delusions). Even then, Japanese educators flocked to the U. S. to find the secret of our creativity. They still do. Consider this recent quote from Joseph Renzulli, reporting on why a group of Japanese educators visiting his National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut said they were there. Renzulli expressed the usual American astonishment that educators from the nation with some of the highest scores in the world would think they could learn something from us. This was their reply, a direct quote:

“Very simple professor. We have no Nobel Prize Winners. Your schools have produced a continuous flow of inventors, designers, entrepreneurs, and innovative leaders. We can make anything you invent faster, cheaper, and, in most cases, better. But we want to learn what role this “creative productivity” focus plays in the production of creative and inventive people.” (Source: Renzulli, Joseph: “Neglecting Creativity: A Quiet Crisis Clouding the Future of R&D.” *Education Week*, May 25, 2005).

(Those at the *Times* will recall Howard W. French’s August 7, 2001 *Times* article, “Hypothesis: Science Gap; Cause: Japan’s Ways,” citing many Japanese scientists on the various reasons why they don’t win Nobels). No Child Left Behind is the antithesis of creativity.

Looking to Japan, Staples' essay opens, "The United States will become a second-rate economic power unless it can match the educational performance of its rivals abroad and get more of its students to achieve at the highest levels in math, science, and literacy."

Had Mr. Staples researched this topic, he might have noticed that this is precisely the same allegation made in 1983 in "A Nation At Risk." Pointing specifically to Japan, Germany and South Korea, the authors warned, "If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system" (p. 7). Better rhetoric, but it turned out to be wrong then, too.

Researching the issue, he might have seen the 1994 headline over Sylvia Nasar's article, "The American Economy, Back on Top." Many other publications of that period trumpeted the same triumph. We had a recession; many people blamed the schools but voted George H. W. Bush out of office. The economy came roaring back; people did not credit the schools. *Sputnik redux*. (Nasar, Sylvia. "The American Economy, Back on Top." *New York Times*, February 27, 1994).

By 2001, many headlines echoed the one over Bill Safire's column of March 15, "The Sinking Sun?" In the *Washington Post*, George F. Will asked a similar question regarding Japan's economic future: "Another Decade of Economic Trouble?" (March 25). Japan's students were still acing tests, but that didn't goose the Japanese economy which at that point had been stagnant or in recession for a decade. Japanese kids continue to ace tests although some are alarmed that on one test they fell to 6<sup>th</sup> place. The economy is still wheezing.

Meanwhile, though we didn't know it in 1994, we were in the early stages of the longest sustained economic expansion in the nation's history. But, three months after Nasar's article, IBM CEO Lou Gerstner took to the *Times* op-ed page with "Our Schools Are Failing" (May 27, p. A27). Why are they failing? Because American kids can't keep up with their peers abroad.

Staples might also have come across a Peter Applebome piece, "Better Schools, Uncertain Results," *New York Times*, March 16, 1997. Applebome reported that "many educators and economists are increasingly skeptical of the notion that better schools mean a more prosperous nation." Applebome quoted Peter Capelli, director of the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce at the University of Pennsylvania, "The link between education and the national economy is pretty tenuous in all but the grossest sense—say the difference between developed and undeveloped countries."

Back in 2001 the United States ranked second in the world in global competitiveness among 75 ranked nations. In 2004, it was #1 among 104 nations and in 2005 #1 among 117 (Sources: *The Global Competitiveness Report*, 2001-2002, 2004-2005, and 2005-2006, respectively. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum).

Mr. Staples continues with “The countries that are leaving us behind in math and science decide at the national level what students should learn and when.” But, as noted above, the Atkin and Black analysis found that the countries that *we* are leaving behind also make these decisions nationally. And “leaving us behind” is a bit hyperbolic, as rhetoric goes. If one looks at the actual scores, one sees that countries often bunch tightly. This is especially if one discards the 600 point scale that these studies use and which makes small differences seem large and looks at the results in simple percent correct. For instance, in TIMSS1995, U. S. 8<sup>th</sup> graders got 58% of the science items correct, two percentage points above the international average of 56% correct. This score placed them 17<sup>th</sup> among the 41 participating countries. Had they gotten a mere 5% more correct, they would have soared to 5<sup>th</sup> place. Had they gotten a mere 5% fewer correct, they would have plummeted to 29<sup>th</sup> place (Source: *Science Achievement in the Middle School Years: IEA’s Third International Mathematics and Science Study*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College).

Mr. Staples then impugns every state in the union claiming that “The states have gotten around the new law (NCLB) by setting state standards as low as possible and making state tests easy.” While it is true that Texas said 91% of its 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in math and NAEP said 24%, two states have tougher standards than NAEP and for fully 13 the difference is less than 10 percent (Source: *Testing the Testers*. New York: Princeton Review, 2003).

He goes on: “This strategy was exposed as fraudulent just last month, when states that had performed so well on their own exams performed dismally on the alternative and more rigorous test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress.”

Actually, it is NAEP that is out of line. Its achievement levels—basic, proficient, and advanced—are ridiculously high. For instance, in TIMSS1995, American 4<sup>th</sup> graders were third in the world in science among 26 countries, but NAEP declared only 26 percent of them “proficient” or better. As University of North Carolina psychometrician, Lyle V. Jones reported, NAEP found only 18% of American 4<sup>th</sup> graders to be proficient in math and a meager 2% to be advanced. He then compared this to their above average performance in TIMSS1995 and observed, “The average math performance for U. S. fourth-graders is significantly above the international average. When U. S. fourth graders perform well in an international comparison, isn’t it unreasonable that only 20 percent are reported by [NAEP] to be ‘proficient or better?’”

We can safely assume it was a rhetorical question.

In fact, the Government Accounting Office, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Education, and the Center for Research in Evaluation, Student Standards and Testing, have all evaluated the NAEP achievement levels, found them wanting, and said, in polite language, “These things are no damn good.” Here are a few words from the NAS: “NAEP’s current achievement level setting procedures remain fundamentally flawed. The judgment tasks are difficult and confusing; raters’ judgments

of different item types are internally inconsistent; appropriate validity evidence for the cut scores is lacking; and the process has produced unreasonable results.”

Fundamentally flawed? Validity evidence lacking? Can you imagine the howls of outrage that would greet ETS or CTB/McGraw-Hill if they dared bring to market a test with such basic failures?

The groups that studied the NAEP achievement levels recommended they be replaced. They have not been replaced and there is no movement to replace them simply because there is so much political hay to be made by saying American kids and American schools stink (Sources: *NAGB's Approach Yields Misleading Interpretations.*<sup>2</sup> Washington, D.C.: U. S. General Accounting Office, Report No. GAO/PEMD-93-12, 1993; *Assessment in Transition: Monitoring the Nation's Educational Progress.* Mountain View, CA: National Academy of Education, 1997; *Grading the Nation's Report Card: Evaluating NAEP and Transforming the Assessment of Educational Progress.* Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences; Jones, Lyle V. “National Tests and Educational Reform: Are They Compatible?” William Angoff Distinguished Lecture, Educational Testing Service, later published by the Policy Information Center, ETS, 1997).

(For what it is worth, the states with the largest NAEP-state discrepancies are mostly in the Deep South and Southwest. The bottom 12 are TX, AL, NC, OK, ND, HI, IA, TN, WV, FL, NM and MS. Source: *Testing the Testers*, op. cit.).

Mr. Staples' position that schools stink calls to mind Mr. Cheney's position that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction and is in cahoots with Al Qaeda. Barring a fifth heart attack, we must suffer Mr. Cheney's delusions another three years. There is no reason to put up with Mr. Staples' false information another minute.

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<sup>2</sup> NAGB is the National Assessment Governing Board which sets policy for NAEP.