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From the Editor, Issue 23, 2000

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From the Editor

A report by the Rand Corp. (also reported by the *New York Times* on the web, Wednesday 7/26/2000) concludes that smaller classes in early grades and access to preschool appear to increase student achievement, particularly in impoverished communities, more than salaries, education or experience of teachers.

During World War II women were recruited to work in war production. Most factories had a nursery school and a preschool for the children of the working mothers on the premises. After the war there was a vigorous campaign to force women to leave the factories. Preschool for children was forgotten and discouraged. Nursery schools and preschools, if they existed, were for the wealthy and near-wealthy.

Today in Denmark nursery school and preschool teachers are professionals and well-paid. In the U.S. those are usually entry level jobs.

The Rand Corp. reports seem to be rediscovering what was well-known fifty-five years ago.

Today a prominent subject is under what circumstances children should be "retained a grade" (not promoted). The cause of the children's deficiencies or the efficacy of that idea is, at best, secondary. The fact that most children subjected to that possibility are poor is an embarrassment that politicians prefer not to discuss.

At Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration in the 1930's, he stated that, "One-third of the nation is ill-fed, ill-clothed and ill-housed." In the sixty-seven years that have passed, that fraction has not diminished.

A related story in the July 14 *Los Angeles Times* concerns the high stakes testing called The Stanford 9. This phenomenon seems to be centered in California but published and copyrighted by Harcourt Educational Measurement of San Antonio. The children who are subjected to this test are threatened with retention in grade if their scores are too low. Teachers of poor scoring children are threatened with reduction in salary.

In order to maximize profits by avoiding having to revise or correct the test, the publisher had kept the test secret and sworn to secrecy all who handle it. The *Los Angeles Times* secretly received a copy and gave it to two experts to review, W. James Popham, a professor of education emeritus at UCLA, and Robert Schaeffer, public education director for the National Center for Fair and Open testing. They concluded that the test is fundamentally flawed. "Students' scores are almost certain to be meaningfully contaminated by factors that have little to do with the effectiveness of a teaching staff's instructional efforts," Popham said.

Popham also said that "California should not reward or punish students, teachers and schools strictly on the basis of test scores as the state plans to do." Some test questions are culturally biased. Some favor children and schools that own computers. At least one of the multiple choice questions has no correct responses!

The fate of children, teachers and schools is hanging on a threadbare string. It seems to me that profound decisions about education and educational policy are being made on the basis of seriously flawed data, secrecy, a refusal to deal with the real, substantial issues, and by an arrogant corps of politicians and bureaucrats.