

The Academy of (Lesser) Science

Every so often, too infrequently in fact, comes a defining event in the life of the educational world. Such is the case for this year's Illinois State Science Fair competitions hosted annually by the Illinois Junior Academy of Science. For the fourth year in a row, the state championship title went to a small independent school, Avery Coonley School in Downers Grove, a Pre-kindergarten-Grade 8 school that offers a very strong and traditional academic program. What is noteworthy and commendable for the school was that the demanding academic expectations of the school, and particularly in this instance, of the science program, resulted in the "four-peat," the unheard of string of annual victories by the school. What is astonishing and unspeakably absurd was a decision by the board of the Academy to banish the school from team competition for the next year, on the grounds that their students were "just too good," and therefore obviously put all the other schools at a distinct and somehow unfair disadvantage. "We have decided to give other schools an opportunity to win," explains Janine Petric, president of the Academy of Science. "We want to spread the wealth around."

The Avery Coonley students, admittedly a precocious and confident group of seventh and eighth graders, took strenuous exception to the ruling, taking their case immediately to the airwaves on Chicago talk radio at first and then eventually in nightly news spots and in newspaper interviews as the controversy emerged and caused, thankfully, a furor. Of course, the first thing the students countered with was an analogy: "Nobody says the Bulls shouldn't be allowed to go for the 'four-peat,' so why should we not be able to continue to compete for the championship?" Indeed. Imagine the brouhaha if a public school state football or field hockey champion team were prohibited from playing in successive state tournaments because of the "unfair advantage" of their superior coaching or better athletes: one would have to call out the riot police to quell the fans. A member of the Academy reportedly has dismissed the obvious parallel by sniffing, "Well, this is science, not sports." OK: should we limit the University of Chicago professorate from receiving any additional Nobel prizes since they have such an unbelievable string of them? (I doubt that their cache of Nobels causes such great consternation at other universities and such a resultant inferiority complex that the competitors would shrink from further research into the abstract and unknown frontiers of economics, science, literature, and the like.) Likewise, is it becoming tiresome for the Tribune, the Times, and other flagship newspapers to continually win all those Pulitzer prizes for journalism? Should we take them out of the competition for a while so the Downers Grove Reporter has a shot at glory?

One wonders how the student members of the other teams (obviously bright and talented students themselves) feel about the Academy of Science ruling. How big a win is it if the best team is banned from the competition? Remember the Olympics without the Russians? "It's not that the other teams can't win," offers one Avery Coonley student over the radio waves, "but our teachers just hold us to higher standards. The competition demands, for example, only three outside references, but our teachers make us do ten." Higher standards for academic excellence: now that sounds like a subversive and anti-scientific notion, doesn't it? "What is going on here?" one wonders.

It seems obvious that we have here the perfect incarnation of the growing movement in school education circles to shift focus away from academics and to "self-esteem." No wonder that in many schools grades are inflated and carry no weight, literally, at all (including at the most prestigious colleges and universities where the average grade is now B+ and, in some institutions, all D's and F's have been abolished). If in the real world "feeling good" completely took the place of excellence, we would be in a thicker stew than we are already. "This smacks of socialism," one Avery Coonley student fumes, indignantly and a bit histrionically. In fact, of course, the real world is going in the opposite direction: downsizing (or "right-sizing") for efficiency, investing in research and development, championing quality, striving for excellence. In what universe does the Illinois Junior Academy of Science operate?

Apparently in the Swiftian universe of Laputa, where attendants follow intellectuals carrying a bladder-like device to bat the geniuses periodically on the ears to remind them to listen and on the mouth to remind them to speak. Swift's "lost in space" scientists in his "Grand Academy of Lagado" have found their match with those of the Illinois Junior Academy of Science. In Swift's context, these Avery Coonley students, at least for their "fifteen minutes of fame," are giant Brobdingnagians, in sharp contrast to the Lilliputian myopia of their elders in the Academy of (Lesser) Science. The winning entries in the competition included Nicole Zacharia's project of blending newspaper and corn to make fuel; Brendan Chrisman's project comparing the absorbency and quality of different types of recycled paper; Cliona McKennan's project testing the effects of oxidants on yeast; and Shouvik Banerjee's project investigating the effect of nicotine on bacteria. These 7th and 8th graders managed to do serious, scholarly research, actually becoming both engaged in and excited about science, proud of their work and their school, determined to do their best individually and collectively. Aren't these the attitudes we would like to see cultivated in all of our children in all of our schools?

It is not often, regrettably, that the general public raises a ruckus over matters of intellectual fairness and competition or that anyone outside the world of private schools steps in to defend an independent school. There is a staunchly pro-public school bias in our country, infinitely stronger than in other westernized democracies, one that typically is prejudiced in general against the private domain of schooling even though polls indicate that up to seventy per cent of current families with school-age children would choose a private school over a public one were tuition/funding not an issue. In large part this bias is a carryover from prior generations' report cards where the public schools deservedly earned high grades for success in their mission: as a democratic force to educate all its students to be good citizens and good workers for a united country. The current evidence is mixed at best, whether that mission is achieved or even attended to, given the sometimes impossible demands now placed upon public schools. It is clear that the gravest fears of the public school educators unions (NEA, AFT) and their powerful lobbies that continually defeat school choice initiatives in state legislature after state legislature are manifest: empowered with vouchers to pay for tuition at private schools, many families might well choose to enroll their children in a private school, one that has a more focused mission and high academic expectations for all, and the public

schools that could not compete would be abandoned. More and more of the general citizenry are beginning to believe that fate would not be all bad. The Illinois Junior Academy of Science banishment of excellence merely adds fuel to that fire. Enshrinement of mediocrity is the next stop down their road, one no school, independent or public, should wish to travel.

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