



Grapevine

REPORT CARDS FOR TEACHERS?

New York Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced in February that probationary teachers will gain permanent status if the test-score data of their students indicates they've raised achievement. 'Over the years, tenure has become an expectation more than an honour,' Klein explained in a letter to NY teachers in February. Mind you, he added, 'Our goal is to align tenure decisions more effectively with the results you are achieving every day, but let me be clear: we are not proposing to base tenure decisions on student test scores alone – that would be insufficient.' Somehow, that proposition transformed as it crossed the American continent and the Pacific, reappearing in Sydney as a cunning plan to introduce report cards for teachers in Australia. What? The Commonwealth Minister for Education and Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, apparently 'refused to back away from supporting (Klein's) new measures.' As the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Heath Gilmore reported it, 'Julia Gillard is fuelling speculation the (Commonwealth) government will consider report cards for teachers, based on class performance.' What on earth did she say to Gilmore? 'We obviously take an interest in developments overseas and strongly support transparency in schools.' If you ever wondered, now you know: that's how you fuel speculation.

OVERHEARD

Two mums overheard at after-school swimming class, discussing the variation between the Year 1 curriculum in Queensland and Victoria: 'How can there be so much difference between states?'

CYBERBULLYING

School authorities have their eye on cyberbullying on sites like Facebook, but where's the line between cyberbullying and freedom of speech? That's the key question in a case involving a Facebook posting by Katherine Evans, a former student at Pembroke Pines Charter High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in the United States, that we

reported in the Grapevine in April last year. 'To those select students who have had the displeasure of (being taught by) Ms Sarah Phelps, or simply knowing her and her insane antics: here is the place to express your feelings of hatred,' Evans wrote on Facebook. She removed the post a few days later, before being suspended by principal Peter Bayer for cyberbullying. Backed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, Evans sued Bayer. So where's that line between cyberbullying and freedom of speech? Judge Barry L Garber drew it thus, in his judgement on that case, *Bayer v Evans* in the US District Court, Southern District of Florida. 'Evans's speech falls under the wide umbrella of protected speech,' Judge Garber ruled. 'It was an opinion of a student about a teacher, that was published off-campus, did not cause any disruption on-campus, and was not lewd, vulgar, threatening, or advocating illegal or dangerous behaviour.... (Bayer's) actions do not even comport with the requirements for the regulation of on-campus speech,' Judge Garber noted. 'There must be an indication of disruption, future or present.... There was no disruption in classes, and...no teachers were involved in quieting students.' He also ruled that Evans could pursue Bayer for damages and costs.

HIGH-STAKES TESTING

James Berry, principal of Atherton Elementary School in Georgia in the United States and his assistant principal, Doretha Alexander, were both charged with falsifying a state document – aka cheating – last year, after changing Year 5 students' answers on Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) – a high-stakes test that measures whether schools have made 'adequate yearly progress' against US federal benchmarks. According to case files obtained by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* under Georgia's *Open Records Act*, Alexander admitted to calling out the answers, while Berry admitted to erasing wrong answers and making corrections. The *Journal-Constitution's* Maureen Downey reported

that cheating appears to have occurred in 37 of 55 elementary schools in the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system that runs Atherton Elementary. Dr Beverly Hall, who heads APS, has so far survived the crisis. Not so Berry and Alexander, who were banned from working in Georgia's public schools for two years and one year respectively. Georgia's Office of Student Achievement released a list of 74 schools across the state they were investigating, which includes the 37 suspect schools in the APS system. Hall was named the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) 2009 National Superintendent of the Year last February. According to AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech, 'Hall has accomplished significant gains in student achievement.' A year on, critics are now asking whether schools with 'significant gains in student achievement' were audited or indeed whether students were tracked through to high school to see whether those gains were maintained.

PERHAPS YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE THE JOKE, JOHNNY, AND WE CAN ALL HAVE A LAUGH?

The next time you're thinking about using the 'Perhaps you'd like to share the joke' line, remember this: neurobiological researchers Karli Watson, Benjamin Matthews and John Allman have found that jokes actually show we're smart. Cracking a joke, or laughing at one, activates regions of the frontal and cingulate cortex, which are linked with association formation, learning and decision-making, Watson, Matthews and Allman explain. Their research is reported in 'Brain activation during sight gags and language-dependent humour,' a deadpan article in *Cerebral Cortex*, but be warned: there's no punchline, unless you count the conclusion that 'humour may have coevolved with another cognitive specialisation of the great apes and humans: the ability to navigate through a shifting and complex social space.'

The Grapevine is written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher.