

The 'dumbing down' of American schools

By Maggie Gallagher

OUTSIDE my window, the air is crisp, the leaves are gently singed red, and the kids are safely in school. Or so I hope.

Like many parents, right about now is the time I start worrying about what education deficiencies or disasters back-to-school night might reveal. Not in my son, you understand, who is a fine student, but in his school.

I'm not talking here about the cultural atrocities — the preternaturally noble Indians, the recycling lectures, the condom courses, the Columbus-bashing, the prematurely hopeless 12-year-old convinced that, as one kid I know put it, "Humans will be extinct in 80 years due to global warming." No, what I fear is something even more basic: the latest educational fad.

Something bizarre is always popping up. The NEW new math, for example, teaches kids there *is* no such thing as a wrong answer; there are only better and worse approaches. (Try telling your employer it's the thought that counts). One mother I know worries that her son, a straight-A high school student, can't write a coherent paragraph. The culprit appears to be something called "cooperative learning," in which reports are written by small groups of students who are supposed to tutor each other.

Since the kids are no dummies, what actually happens is this: The best writer does the writing, the best researcher does the research, the best illustrator does the graphs for every report. The result of their collaboration is indeed a stunning grade-A product. It's just that the kids never learn individually to do what they don't already know how to do.

One of the longest-running educational fads is called "dumbing down." OK, so I forget the technical term, but the practice is ubiquitous. One professor sampled 788 text- books used between 1860 and 1992 and concluded honors high school texts today are not any more difficult than an eighth-grade reader was before World War II. "Books were simplified," Cornell Professor Donald Hayes told *The New York Times*, "because educators thought children would learn to read more easily." They do. Only it turns out not as well.

In California, a state reading task force just recommended dropping the widely used Whole Language approach to reading in favor of more phonics, spelling and grammar. After 10 years of this advanced educational experiment, California fourth-graders ranked dead-last in reading; more than 40 percent lacked basic reading proficiency.

What Is Whole Language, you ask? If you are a parent appalled that your second-grader is pulling down good grades for writing sentences like "I luf tu rite," you know all too well.

It is the theory that children learn reading best if they are not taught anything. Grammar or phonetics is an oppressive interference in the natural relation between the reader (or, in this case the illiterate) and "the text." It has been, for reasons inexplicable to the normal person, a surprisingly influential educational idea.

The latest pedagogical buzz word is "EQ," or emotional intelligence, which is the term researchers have settled on for the ability to read one's own feelings, control one's own impulses, and persevere in the face of setbacks. Over the last 15 years, according to *The New York Times*, research shows "America's children, on average, had become more anxious and depressed, more impulsive and mean, more demanding and disobedient, more hot-tempered and aggressive."

Even more serious, the EQ fad threatens to divert yet more classroom time from academic tasks. Just this year, the Yale Child Study Center launched an initiative to promote teaching children basic skills: controlling impulses, showing empathy, cooperating with others, focusing on a task and resolving conflicts.

We used to have many such teachers. They were called parents.

Maggie Gallagher's column is distributed by Universal Press Syndicate