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## School Yard

Reporter's notes from the region's school districts

Posted 2 hour(s) ago

### Procon.org - overwhelming ambivalence

By DANIEL P. BADER

If I didn't have an opinion about standardized testing, I certainly don't now.

I came to that conclusion just moments after clicking on procon.org's recently released education website that weighs the pluses and minuses of standardized testing.

The issues surrounding standardized tests have been talked and written about over and over, but listing them right next to each other the way procon does had my head spinning.

I find myself going back and forth saying, "Well, that makes sense," to each column, back and forth, back and forth.

I can't even tell you if I like the site. Let's list the pros and cons of the new site.

Pro: There's lots of thought provoking information.

Con: There are so many contradictory statements, each for and against the tests its hard to know what to believe.

Pro: It's clear, well written and seemingly informed.

Con: There's so much reading required behind each statement that I find myself not actually buying either the pro or the con arguments.

Pro: Someone could catch up very quickly on the argument if they're new to the debate.

Con: They might be like me, and not know what to believe, despite so many facts all in one place.

Final determination: After much back and forth, I still don't know how I feel about standardized testing, or procon.org's new site.

Then again, my head is full of new, helpful information.

But, on the other hand, I have a headache, and can't think of one "con" to getting some asprin ... and away from [this site](#).

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Updated May 20, 2011 @ 06:13 PM

### NASSA and the weather balloon

By DANIEL P. BADER



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> Education reporter gives you news, context and insight from the region's school.

Contact Dan: [dbader@uticaod.com](mailto:dbader@uticaod.com) or (315) 792-4956

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At the Glenn Center

The Neighborhood After School Science Association, a group of school students from Rome, are in Ohio as finalists of a competition by NASA. Today they launched their experiment, watched the weather balloon go up, and tracked their experiment after the balloon popped, to a farmer's field nearby.

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Updated May 18, 2011 @ 02:57 PM

## Following NASSA in Ohio

By DANIEL P. BADER





Greeted by NASA.

We're experimenting this week by trying to follow Rome-area mom Beth Bulawa and her Neighborhood After-School Science Association, or NASSA. NASSA is one of four groups chosen by NASA to conduct one of their homemade experiments this week at the Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio, as part of the second Balloonsat High-Altitude Flight Competition.

Bulawa will try and send updates throughout the week. So far, we know they safely arrived, and were greeted by a NASA representative. The weather balloon launch date has been pushed back a day because of bad weather, so now the students' experiment will go up on Friday.

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Posted May 17, 2011 @ 05:27 PM

## Scandal ousts former W'boro super

By DANIEL P. BADER

Former long-time Whitesboro Central School District Superintendent Lawrence Zacher has been fired from his position as interim superintendent of the Jordan-Elbridge Central School District, a 1,500-student district west of Syracuse.

The termination follows a **Syracuse Post-Standard** investigation into the \$300,000 contract negotiated by Zacher and district director of operations Paula VanMinos.

A clause of that contract would have essentially forced the district's school board to grant VanMinos tenure in the district or face paying her three years' worth of salary.

The paper raised the alarm after also observing a potential conflict of interest between Zacher and VanMinos.

Reporters saw VanMinos entering Zacher's apartment in the evenings and leaving in the mornings, though neither official would comment on whether they were in a relationship or not.

Following that story, the Post-Standard reported that the **board of education** met in an emergency meeting and voided VanMinos' contract, and effectively terminated both Zacher and VanMinos.

Zacher is out immediately, and a board of education resolution voided VanMinos' contract and had language that said she would not work for the district following a 60-day suspension.

Zacher, who reportedly still has a house in Whitesboro, was superintendent of Whitesboro Central School District between 1994-2002. He retired from that district in 2002 and was interim superintendent at the Mt. Markham Central School District in 2005 and at the Owen D. Young Central School in 2008.

**More reading:** [Auburnpub.com](#) has a recap and reactions from the board of education meeting.

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Posted May 09, 2011 @ 12:01 PM

## Mail bag: Education news for your Monday

By DANIEL P. BADER

SUNY Empire State College at Utica to hold information session

UTICA – The State University of New York Empire State College will hold a public information session about its associate and bachelor's degree programs at 4 p.m. on Wednesday, May 18 in Conference Room A of the Utica State Office Building.

Empire State College was established in 1971 to offer adult learners the opportunity to earn associate, bachelor's and master's degrees from SUNY. Students learn through independent studies, online courses, seminars and residencies. Learners also may earn credit for prior college-level learning from work and life experience.

To reserve a space for the information session visit [www.esc.edu](http://www.esc.edu) and select the location nearest to you or call 793-2684. You may also register by calling 800-347-3000 and selecting option 1.

Herkimer County Community College announces a new academic program in criminal justice

HERKIMER – Beginning this fall, Herkimer County Community College will offer a new criminal justice program called “Crime and Intelligence Analysis” which was recently approved by the State Education Department.

The program will focus on developing research and analytical skills to be used in either a crime analysis or intelligence unit within a variety of criminal justice agencies. Crime analysis is utilized within law enforcement to determine such things as staffing patterns and assignment of specialized units. It's also used to develop profiles designed to help identify individual offenders. Students are trained to predict future crimes by using statistical analysis and other specialized techniques. They will learn to make reliable decisions based on analytical ability and critical thinking skills.

For more information call 315-866-0300, ext. 8278.

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Posted Apr 19, 2011 @ 02:17 PM

## Empty net at Proctor

By DANIEL P. BADER

Athletic Director Martin Nemecek had a pained look on his stubbly face when asked about the end of the Varsity Hockey Program, which was cut out of this year's budget. Athletics took a \$120,000-plus hit in the 2011-12 spending plan. Hopefully it will be back next year, Nemecek said.

“We looked all over the place (for cuts),” he said.

The problem is the high cost of ice time, and relatively low number of students participating. By all accounts, the Proctor team pulled players from smaller districts to put a team on the ice, and had kids from as low as seventh grade playing on the team. All in all, the program cost about \$1,000 per student, something the district couldn't swallow with an almost \$8 million deficit to make up.

“I understand the parents are concerned.” Nemecek said after the budget was adopted by the board on Monday. “I didn't want to cut any program totally.”

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Posted Apr 19, 2011 @ 01:13 PM

## Relief in the UCSD biz office

By DANIEL P. BADER

The mood in the business office of the Utica City School District was pretty light on Monday afternoon. The budget was done. After the back and forth and ups and downs of the budget process, no one would blame Maureen Albanese, the district's business manager, if her office was a bit messy. It wasn't. Her desk was pretty tidy and she was visibly relieved that the bulk of the work was over. The \$133 million spending plan, the cuts, the money the legislature replaced, have taken up the bulk of every day since January. The biggest achievement was keeping full year kindergarten in the budget, she said.

“It's been a very difficult year,” Albanese said. “It's been a very difficult, long process.”

She and her staff only get a partial reprieve, however.

“Starting July 1, I’ll be looking at next year’s budget,” she said.

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Posted Apr 19, 2011 @ 10:27 AM

## Required reading: What we're looking at

By DANIEL P. BADER

A **Times Union** column refutes Gov. Andrew Cuomo's assertion that New York is 34th in the nation in education.

The **Business Insider** blog has a guest post that looks at employment and education.

The **Chronicle of Higher Education** explores how colleges are paying more attention to their websites.

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Posted Apr 11, 2011 @ 02:16 PM

## Mail bag: Local ed news

By DANIEL P. BADER

### Mount Markham champions ready for limo ride

The students on Team Mount Markham, the champions of the March 17 Drug Quiz Show at Herkimer County Community College, are ready to collect their prize. The team of fifth through eighth graders took the top spot at the competition, which tests students' knowledge of drugs and alcohol. Their prize? On Friday they'll take a donated limo ride to a meal at Applebee's Neighborhood Bar and Grill in Herkimer.

### Absentee ballots for May 17 election

If you're not going to be in the area on May 17 and want to cast your ballot for or against your local school board budget and candidates for open positions on the board, now is the time to ask for them. In Utica, you can get an application for an absentee ballot in the board clerk's office at 106 Memorial Parkway.

If you can't go in person, you can ask for an application by telephone at 792-2078 up until May 10. If you physically go to the board offices, you can get your application up to May 13, the Friday before the vote. Once you get a ballot, you have until 5 p.m. the day of the election to return them.

### Board meetings: Tuesday April 12

Dolgeville: 6 p.m. in the high school cafeteria

Clinton: 7:30 p.m., in the Performing Arts Complex Theater

Hot topic: board is expected to adopt 2011-12 \$22.6 million budget, with 2.5 percent tax levy increase

### Wednesday April 13

Utica: Special meeting from 6-7 p.m., budget workshop at 7 p.m.

*The mail bag is a highlight of news sent to the O-D, it does not constitute a complete calendar of events or board meetings.*

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Posted Apr 04, 2011 @ 01:21 PM

## Grading teachers

By DANIEL P. BADER

We know how students are evaluated. Elementary and middle schoolers have to make “annual

yearly progress” on their English and Math tests, high school kids have to do well on math and English science Regents exams, and the entire school has to improve its graduation rate year to year. Now, the **Albany Times Union** is reporting how New York has decided how it will evaluate teachers.

Right now, teachers are evaluated by their principals. They’re observed teaching, and their lesson plans are evaluated. The changing rules, dictated by the state winning almost \$700 million in federal Race to the Top dollars, mean success will be a factor too. If their kids do well, so will they. The same for principals. The argument against this is that teachers and principals can’t control a student’s home life, can’t make them study, can’t make sure they have a power breakfast before taking a test, but their careers might hang on how a student does on a particular test. I’m not sure if that’s fair or not, but I remember being a student and how much that one test mattered to my future, it seems like it should have mattered to my teacher almost as much, at least beyond their personal or professional concerns.

Then again, I turned out just fine, and I never thought any of my teachers didn't care or try their hardest to make sure I understood what I was taught.

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Updated Mar 31, 2011 @ 09:33 AM

## How dumb are we?

By DANIEL P. BADER

I just sat down to read the reinvented Newsweek magazine, which my wife subscribed to recently. It's the first one I received in the mail, and was full of nuclear disaster and tsunami talk. There is a piece on how No Child Left Behind is still a bad idea, and the other semi-education related topic on the basic citizenship test.

It might be nuclear oblivion overload, but this article on the test has stuck in my mind the most. Newsweek gave the basic citizenship test to 1,000 people to see how many would fail. It's not the first magazine to do so, and it's one of those article we always shake our head at.

This one is no different.

Nine percent of the people who took the test didn't know the name of the ocean that is on the west coast of our country. (It's the Pacific, if you're one of these people.)

Only 71-percent of those who took the test could say who the vice president is. (Joseph Biden)

Only 6 percent of respondents knew how many amendments there are to the constitution. (I admit, I, too, had no idea. It's 27.)

Two thousand, six hundred people didn't know the first three words to the Constitution, which is the idea of self government. (We the People).

Gender-wise, men did better than women on the test. (67 percent vs. 58 percent)

Those who were in a higher income bracket did better than their poorer counterparts. (75 percent of those making \$100,000 or more compared to 41 percent of those making less than \$20,000)

Try the **test yourself**, if you can bear it. I've already given you a head start.

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Posted Mar 28, 2011 @ 11:29 AM

## Ilion schools in the NY Times

By DANIEL P. BADER

The Ilion Central School District got some national attention over the weekend with a Saturday editorial in the **New York Times**.

The district was used as an example of the inequality and severity of the proposed cuts to education, which the **O-D** has been exploring ever since Gov. Andrew Cuomo proposed his budget on Feb. 1.

Unfortunately, the piece came a bit too late.

Today's headlines are that the "three men in a room" in Albany, the leaders of the Assembly and Senate and Cuomo, had come to a tentative agreement on the budget on Sunday.

It would have been timely if the legislature acted as it normally does - by passing its budget by the March 31st deadline or later, which is far more typical.

As the **Wall Street Journal** pointed out in today's piece on the agreement, if the budget passes before then it would be the first time since 1983, which happens to be the first budget of Gov. Mario Cuomo.

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Posted Mar 16, 2011 @ 03:46 PM

## What does a 15 year old know?

By DANIEL P. BADER

Did you know that the United States is the second highest spender when it comes to education? Guess who's first. Luxembourg. Despite that investment, we rank only near average in what 15 year olds know compared 15 year olds in the rest of the world. Luxemburgers' 15 year olds fared worse.

That's according to a recent policy paper by the McGraw-Hill Research Foundation called "**What the U.S. can learn from the world's most successful education reform efforts.**"

Almost every bit of this paper hits on issues I've written about recently. Unions and pay freezes? The paper found that teachers do not have the same social status they once had, and that fewer people would want their children to become teachers.

"Teaching in the U.S. is unfortunately no longer a high-status occupation. Anecdotally, it appears that few parents wish to see their children enter the profession. Despite the characterization of some that teaching is an "easy" job - with short hours and Summers off - the fact is that successful, dedicated teachers in the U.S. work long hours for little pay and, in many cases, insufficient support from their leadership," the paper reads.

How about spending inequalities between high-wealth districts and aid dependent districts?

The United States, according to the report, is only one of four countries in a group called the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, that spends less in economically disadvantaged communities than it spends in wealthy communities.

Canada, it said, jumped its performance on the test, called the Program for International Student Assessment, by throwing out our system of finding money for school in property taxes. Instead it shares money equally between provinces, and has become one of the top performers on the test.

Common core standards.

New York has joined almost every other state in adopting core standards - meaning every student across the country would learn about the same thing at the same grade level. This, according to the policy paper, is a step in the right direction. It doesn't mention standardizing assessments and measuring assessment like the Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind programs require. In fact, the top performing nation, Finland, does it exactly opposite.

"The Finnish system of accountability is entirely built from the bottom up. Teacher candidates are selected in part based on their capacity to convey their belief in the core mission of public education in Finland. The next level of accountability rests with the school. While every comprehensive school in Finland reports to a municipal authority, the day-to-day responsibility for managing the schools is left to the professionals, as is the responsibility for assuring student progress. Again, the level of trust that the larger community extends to its schools seems to engender a strong sense of collective responsibility on the part of everyone in the system at all levels for the success of every student."

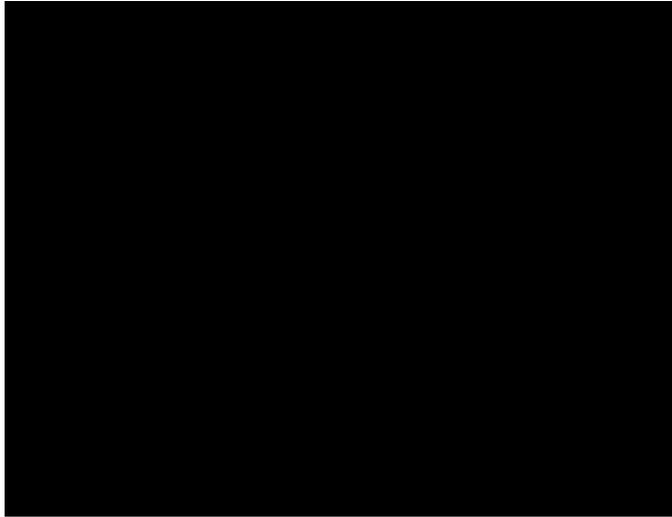
Check out the policy paper, it's clear, concise and provides a direct path its writers believe the nation should take. Agree or not, it's worth a read.

Updated Mar 14, 2011 @ 02:06 PM

## Morning moose

By DANIEL P. BADER

On Friday I dropped my audio recorder in front of the Thomas R. Proctor Moose Ensemble for a recording of the Beatles' "Elanor Rigby." Here it is, with some great photos by Angelica Morrison.



Posted Mar 11, 2011 @ 01:21 PM

## Required reading, the strange and bizarre

By DANIEL P. BADER

From the bizarre and strange to the staggering, no matter where I clicked online this week, the world seemed turned on its head. Here are just a few of the stories from around the state that no matter the context, you're just left shaking your head.

**Post Star:** Principal says teacher wanted student to be his girlfriend.

**New York Times:** Student pours acid on former friend in Chemistry class.

**Albany Times Union:** Guest columnist calls for abolishing school districts and establishing county districts.

**Syracuse Post Standard:** Over 500 job cuts proposed for Syracuse district from former Utica superintendent.

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