

# GRAVE EXPECTATION

an editorial from the Chicago Tribune

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It may be Americans' most commonly recurring nightmare: You're about to take a school exam, but you haven't read any of the course books, or attended any of the classes, or you've committed some other reckless omission. You're frantically trying to concoct some excuse, some way to dodge a certain F . . . and you wake up, probably in a cold sweat.

It's a bad dream shared by millions of us--usually long after our school years and often during a period of stress provoked by the job or other real-life pressures. But a more frightening nightmare may emerge to replace it in the national psyche:

You've got all the grades, the degrees, the credentials required for a good job. You're hired. You take your desk. You look at the work assignment, and . . . you can't do it, because no teacher ever made you learn the skills you now need.

This scenario is a too easily imagined result of one popular education theory when it's stretched to unhealthy extremes--as it was at Sussex Central High School in Georgetown, Del.

As recently reported by Tribune writer Ron Grossman, Sussex teacher Adele Jones was fired because her principal objected to the number of failing grades she dispensed to students in Algebra 2.

"Positive reinforcement," Principal John McCarthy said, is needed to develop kid's self-esteem. Okay so far, but his interpretation of this idea seems to exclude any other kind of reinforcement. "Negative grades" are bad; "unanxious expectations" are in.

Nasty old anxious expectations apparently include tough tests, stringent grading and high standards that might--heaven forbid--provoke a nervous knot in a teenager's stomach.

Jones was tough--no question about that. She insisted that students learn the course material, and she brooked no excuses for poor or incomplete work. By most accounts, however, she was also a caring teacher who devoted many before- and after-school hours to students who needed extra help.

But the school's position, as stated by its attorney, is this: If students can't handle the Algebra 2 curriculum, the teacher should "start at Algebra 1 1/2."

There's a graphic term for this notion: "dumbing down." Jones should have been heaped with praise for resisting the dilution of education standards. Instead, she's waiting tables in a nearby restaurant. Jones' students, including some she had flunked, rallied to her side. They said they struggled in her class because the instructor of their preceding math course didn't teach much. That teacher, of course, is still employed by Sussex Central High.

It's clear that Jones' students didn't learn only algebra. These kids figured out that pride in accomplishment, not empty flattery, is the necessary equation of self-esteem. One can only hope that having learned this lesson, they will hold the next generation to higher standards than we have offered them.