

OPINION & COMMENTARY

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Outrages

■ Thugs — or if you prefer the more polite term, vandals — recently spray-painted swastikas on three churches in Bloomington. Graffiti and other vandalism unfortunately are common, but depictions of swastikas remain extreme and rare. The fact that churches were defaced with the hate-filled symbol makes the vandalism even more distasteful.

■ The director of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources says the agency has received numerous complaints about men engaged in sexual acts in state forests and park restrooms. A sting at four state recreational areas last week resulted in 10 arrests of men accused of engaging in sexual acts in the parks.

Overheard



Marion County Superior Court Judge Marilyn Moores, in a letter to U.S. Attorney Susan Brooks, asking for a review of an Indiana company that arranges surrogate pregnancies.

“With no tracking system or safety net to know where the babies resulting from surrogate contracts are being placed or by whom they are being adopted, the potential for human trafficking is terrifyingly real.”

When the teachers are away, students suffer the consequences

Our position is:

Stemming teacher absenteeism and better pay for hard-to-fill teaching spots are keys to improving IPS students' academic performance.

Crispus Attucks eighth-grader Rebecca Green spent much of seventh grade wondering “why they didn't get someone who was educated” to teach her classes.

For two months, a substitute taught her English class. She says students were often told to sit down when they asked questions. In all, five substitutes rotated in and out of the class because the regular teacher was “out most of the time.” Sometimes, she says, the “substitutes didn't even show up.”

For students of Indianapolis Public Schools, Green's experience is all too common. The district's heavy reliance on substitutes means students often are taught by less-qualified, ill-prepared educators. Learning decreases. Discipline problems increase. And the risk rises that many of IPS' hardest-to-reach students will eventually drop out.

On any given day last school year, at least 14 percent of IPS' 39,000 students attended classes without a regular teacher. Substitutes filled 275 classrooms on an average day. At least 5,500 students a day — based on the lower end of IPS' student-to-teacher ratio — were without regular teachers.

An average of 8.5 percent of IPS teachers were absent from class each day last school year, according to a Star Editorial Board analysis of school district data. That's higher than the average teacher absentee rates for school systems in Seattle, St. Paul, Omaha and Minneapolis — all of which have slightly larger student populations. Private sector firms experience a 2.4 percent average absentee rate.

IPS' average of 11 days absent per teacher is higher than all the districts surveyed except for Minneapolis.

The absenteeism is especially astounding considering the built-in time off that comes with teaching.

IPS also relies heavily on substitutes to fill open positions.

With the start of a new school year only 11 days away, IPS still has 29 teaching positions vacant, nearly all in hard-to-fill areas of math, science and special education, according to Jane Hart-Ajabu, the district's interim human resources chief. She thinks most of those spots will be filled.

But a rash of abrupt departures often occurs in September. Sixty-six teachers resigned or retired in the opening weeks of last school year.

IPS' pool of substitute teachers has grown by a third, to 1,100, in the past five years. The job requirements are low — just 60 college credits and the ability to pass a criminal background check. Few substitutes meet the standard of “highly qualified teachers” called for in the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Longtime IPS substitute Stephanie Patterson says subs often aren't told if they're simply filling in for a regular teacher or are joining a revolving door of replacements. If lesson plans haven't been laid out, Patterson says, “you go in and do the best you can.”

For some students, having a substitute may be seen as a chance to relax



and watch movies. But many understand they're missing out on the opportunity to learn. “They're quite concerned and rightly so,” says Patterson, because “they like the accountability and the discipline.”

As Education Trust Director of Policy Research Kevin Carey, a former adviser to the late Gov. Frank O'Bannon, points out, teachers have to know and understand their students to improve their academic performance. Absenteeism short-circuits academic success.

A study by state education officials in Massachusetts showed a correlation between teacher absenteeism and low test scores. UCLA Professor James Bruno found the same thing three years ago. Two decades earlier, a team led by Cornell education researcher Ronald Ehrenberg linked high teacher

absenteeism to high levels of skipping school by students — a harbinger of a student becoming a dropout.

The consensus among education scholars and reformers is that for the poorest and lowest-performing students, a high-quality teacher can make the difference between graduating and dropping out.

Absenteeism and teacher shortages are by no means limited to IPS. Students in high-poverty urban districts, according to the Education Trust, are 77 percent more likely than those in more affluent school systems to end up with teachers leading courses in subjects for which they were neither trained nor certified.

Why are teachers absent so often? As with any employees, illness, jury duty and family leave account for some days. As does training, which in IPS often

must operate on a risk-analysis basis. The job has always been about public safety, weighing getting the bad guy against keeping everyone else safe.

And keeping themselves alive, too. Last month a Flint, Mich., police officer was killed and two other officers critically injured after they chased a car that was being driven erratically.

Anger- and adrenaline-fueled chases put a wide swath of innocent people at risk. Let's find out what Los Angeles and Orlando know that we don't.

— Beth Murphy

Asleep at the wheel

The Hummer started out as a war wagon, and it really hasn't changed, even when it's being used to drop the kids off at dance class.

The \$50,000 monster truck, along with the swelling pack of armored SUVs and full-size pickups punishing America's pavement, is a driving force behind foreign-oil dependency.

A new report from the Environmental Protection Agency says the average fuel economy of our vehicles has

NOT SHOWING UP

Filling classrooms with fully qualified teachers is a problem for IPS and other urban school systems.

District	Full-time teacher staff	Average subs used daily	Percent of teachers absent daily	Average absentee days per teacher
IPS	3,231	275	8.5	11.1
Omaha	3,643	191	5.2	N/A
Minneapolis	3,884	206	5.3	12.5
Seattle	4,557	98	2.1	1.9
St. Paul	3,401	169	4.9	8.7

Source: Indianapolis Public Schools, Omaha Public Schools, Minneapolis Public Schools, Seattle Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools

Chris Johnson / The Star

takes place during the school day.

Generous leave policies also are a factor. IPS teachers receive between 11 and 13 sick and personal leave days each school year. Unlike in many private businesses, IPS teachers are allowed to accumulate unused sick days year after year. School principals also can grant teachers an unlimited number of days for personal development.

Poor working conditions in the district's antiquated buildings — and the lack of air conditioning — mean teachers are more apt to take sick days or quit altogether. Peggy Hattix-Penn, president of the Indianapolis local of the Indiana State Teachers Association, complains that, “You're swatting flies. You're swatting bees. You know, these aren't the best conditions.”

IPS and other urban districts also must battle a mind-set that they're merely gateways into teaching. A rookie, according to the Education Trust's Carey, can “make their mistakes on IPS students, they learn from their mistakes and take those lessons” to suburban

schools.

What can be done to keep teachers in class? Offering higher salaries for hard-to-find math and science teachers could help alleviate shortages. But it's a move teachers unions have fought vigorously.

New IPS Superintendent Eugene White has committed to move training sessions from school days to keep more full-time teachers in class.

Capital improvements, paid for with last year's \$200 million bond issue, should help IPS improve teacher morale.

Yet, more must be done, including better tracking of how much time is spent on professional development and ending the ability to roll over sick days. Incentive pay for teachers willing to accept the challenge of instructing at-risk students also is critical.

Most IPS students have the ability to learn. But they won't if full-time teachers aren't in classrooms more often. Reducing the high teacher absentee rate is one more essential step in closing the wide achievement gap and lowering the dropout rate.



George Will

Getting emotional about cars

DEARBORN, Mich. — Commuting to and from work must be a blast for William Clay Ford Jr. in his gorgeous green, fully loaded version of the new Mustang that his company is selling as fast as it can make them. But being at work is a lot less fun these days for the entire domestic auto industry.

Henry Ford, the founding father of that industry and this company, grew up in this suburb contiguous to Detroit. Today, his great-grandson, 48, the company's CEO, says “the business model really hasn't changed in 100 years” — internal combustion engine vehicles, sold through dealerships — but the industry faces “a very different kind of future.”

Much better informed customers will increasingly buy on the Internet, or surf it for information enabling them to arrive at dealerships “much better informed than the person they are talking to.” Soon they may be talking about vehicles powered by hydrogen.

Furthermore, Ford says, because “nowhere else do you have 90 minutes of people's undivided attention each day,” Silicon Valley wants to equip cars to feed information to drivers — reading them their e-mails, etc. But should drivers' attentions be so divided? “You do hit the ‘tilt’ sign at some point,” he acknowledges.

The way to get to a glistening future may be to get back to the chrome-covered 1950s, when each autumn boys mounted their balloon-tire Schwinn and rode around to dealerships to savor the excitement of the curtain rising on a new model year. The loss of theatricality — today's seemingly random arrival of too many models, too many of them boring — is central to the domestic industry's decline.

Robert Lutz, head of GM's product development, says, “We're not in the transportation business, we are in the arts and entertainment business.” Ford, perhaps with his Mustang in mind, emphatically agrees: “There's a high emotional component to buying decisions.”

And, he insists, there still is a unique emotional facet of working — from the assembly line to the executive suites — in the automobile industry. Assembly workers, he says, “take it personally if their vehicle” — the one they assemble — “isn't selling.”

But their relatives worked for a company that was much more in the automobile business than it now is. Today, in America, it is a truck manufacturer — F-150s and SUVs — with just one vibrant niche in the automobile market: that Mustang, the scarcity of which, Ford says, fuels the excitement about it.

Detroit, which in 1955 was the nation's fifth-largest city, recently fell, for the first time in a century, out of the list of the 10 largest, replaced by San Jose. Detroit is America's saddest city: Cattle could be grazed in vast swaths of depopulated neighborhoods.

Reversing the decline of “Detroit” — shorthand for the once-muscular domestic auto industry — requires two things. One is the trimming of some benefits the United Auto Workers won when the Big Three were the world's three largest automobile companies. As recently as 25 years ago they had a 76 percent share of the American market and the ability to pass along to consumers the costs of the settlements made with the UAW. Last year Toyota earned \$10.9 billion, more than the Big Three combined, and Detroit's market share was an all-time low, at 58.7 percent.

The other ingredient of revival must be better products. Meaning, among other things, cars that better express the emotional rather than just the utilitarian aspect of cars. Meaning products like the chairman's green Mustang in the garage downstairs.

■ Will is an ABC commentator and Washington Post columnist. Contact him at georgewill@washpost.com

EXPRESSO

A quick shot of opinion from The Star Editorial Board

In pursuit of advice

Anyone who points the finger at Leonard D. Moss Jr. for his death — and that of his passenger, Kelly Baker — as he sped away from police early Wednesday is absolutely right. And Moss' relatives aren't now instant experts in the argument against high-speed police pursuits. However, if I were a law enforcement honcho in Marion County, I'd be calling the police in Los Angeles or Orlando to inquire about how their policies to eliminate or restrict pursuits are working.

Chases, just like any police action,



Murphy



Carpenter

The EPA delayed release of that report until after the congressional vote on the energy bill, which passed with \$14.5 billion in subsidies to the energy industry and virtually no automotive fuel economy measures.

President Bush is eager to sign it. He knows patriotic Americans are ready to roll. How many yellow ribbon magnets can you fit on a Honda Civic, anyway?

— Dan Carpenter

Lesson learned

Though I would never deliberately insult or upset a person with disabilities, I learned a few days ago that



Lichtenberg

thoughtless words could do just that. My reference to the “disabled” in a July 27 column about the 15th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act brought a gentle rebuke from Judith R. Duncan, president and CEO of the Muscular Dystrophy

Family Foundation in Indianapolis. Instead of “handicapped” or “disabled,” she urged saying “person/people with disabilities.” Other suggestions: Use “He has a learning disability,” not “He's learning disabled;” “kids without disabilities or typical kids,” not “normal/health kids;” “She has a physical/mental disability,” not “She's crippled or retarded;” “He's a wheelchair user,” not “He's wheelchair bound.”

In other words, don't define a person only by his use of a wheelchair. We all like to be appreciated for who we really are, not stereotyped for what our limitations might be. That's only normal.

— Jane Lichtenberg