

EDITORIAL

MOVING ON: The Class of 2007 at the Northwest High School, including valedictorian Eric Lane, cheered at the end of the ceremony. Many of their fellow students who did not pass the Graduation Qualifying Exam were able to graduate after receiving waivers. Northwest was one of three Indianapolis Public Schools among the 10 worst school statewide in the number of waivers granted.



Kelly Wilkinson / The Star

Too many waivers means too many kids leave unprepared

Our position:

Restrictions are needed to combat the overuse of waivers from passing the state's graduation exam.

Only 52 percent of Arlington High School's original Class of 2006 made it to graduation last year.

Worse, the Indianapolis Public Schools' high school program isn't adequately preparing enough of the students who do graduate for the rigors of college and life.

Thirty-five percent of Arlington's graduates collected diplomas despite repeatedly failing the Graduation Qualifying Exam, which they are required to pass in order to receive diplomas.

These are students who didn't pass despite having five chances to do so. They didn't pass an exam that tests them only on the eighth- and ninth-grade English and math skills they should have already mastered.

A Star analysis of data released last week by the Indiana Department of Education to the state's Education Roundtable reveals that the problem isn't limited to Arlington.

Too many schools are granting waivers to too many of their students. In the process, they are undermining the state's high school graduation requirements and degrading the value of diplomas.

As Gov. Mitch Daniels declared last week during a roundtable meeting, schools are handing to students "a counterfeit certificate."

Ultimately, they are sending poorly educated students into an economy and society that increasingly demand high-level thinking skills of its citizens:

◆ **At 52 high schools, 10 percent or more of graduating seniors receive diplomas despite failing the GQE:** These high schools account for 44 percent of all students graduating without passing the GQE, even though they account for 14 percent of the statewide Class of 2006.

The list is growing: Only 42 high

ONLINE: CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Add your comments online and we'll publish responses in Sunday's Voices section.

Go to IndyStar.com/opinion, click on the editorial headline and then post a comment at TalkBack.

schools allowed 10 percent or more of their seniors to graduate without passing the test during the 1999-2000 school year, the first year students took it.

◆ The problem is widespread:

Twenty-four of the schools on the list are in urban districts. Seven are in IPS, including three of the 10-worst in the category - Arlington, Northwest and Broad Ripple.

This problem isn't limited to the urban areas. Just across from Louisville in suburban Jeffersonville, Ind., 17 percent of the local high school's graduating class failed the GQE. They still received diplomas.

◆ **Some schools have become waiver factories:** Over the past seven years, seven Indiana high schools have allowed, on average, 10 percent or more of their seniors to collect diplomas despite repeatedly failing the graduation test. Four more schools have done so for five consecutive years.

Those who failed the GQE at Northwest High made up, on average, 27 percent of the school's graduating classes, among the worst in that category over a seven-year period. IPS school Emmerich Manual has done little better, with an average 23 percent of graduating seniors collecting diplomas without passing the test. Fort Wayne's South Side High, an average 21 percent of graduating seniors did so without passing the test.

◆ **There's little evidence that those getting the waivers are special educa-**

THE MOST WAIVERS

These 15 schools have the highest percentage of graduates receiving diplomas without passing the Graduation Qualifying Exam.

Campagna Academy/Charter school: 67 percent
Lew Wallace/Gary: 50 percent
Arlington High/IPS: 35 percent
Wheeler High/Union Township: 33 percent
William A Wirt/Gary: 31 percent
Theodore Roosevelt/Gary: 30 percent
Northwest High/IPS: 29 percent
Paul Harding/East Allen: 26 percent
Broad Ripple/IPS: 22 percent
Benjamin Bosse/Evansville-Vanderburgh: 22 percent
Washington High/South Bend: 21 percent
Emmerich Manual/IPS: 21 percent
Logansport/Logansport: 20 percent
West Side High/Gary: 20 percent
Bendix School/South Bend: 19 percent
For a full list, go to Indystar.com/opinion.

tion students: Some argue that most of the students being granted waivers suffer from either a learning disability or are in special-education classes. While there is no breakdown currently available, that would be statistically unlikely.

Learning-disabled and special-ed students made up just 16 percent of IPS' high school enrollment in 2004, according to a Star analysis of U.S. Department of Education data, the last year available. At North Vermillion High School, learning-disabled students make up just 10 percent of its enrollment. Student attrition, along with their small numbers, almost assures that they wouldn't account for a significant portion of those granted waivers.

GQE failures account for only 6 per-

cent of graduates statewide. Those numbers are growing. One reason: School principals have the discretion to grant the waivers, guaranteeing that there will be uneven application of state standards.

More will likely join those ranks in coming years thanks to a so-called "work-readiness" waiver approved by the General Assembly last year. That allows students to graduate without passing the GQE if they meet a series of requirements, including completing some sort of work-readiness assessment.

State education officials could exercise far greater oversight in this area but they haven't, claiming that there's no law explicitly saying that they must.

As a result, a waiver process originally reserved for students with solid grade-point averages and demonstrated academic skills is hampering the state's efforts to improve the quality of education.

This has national implications. Several states, including Massachusetts, have adapted Indiana's process of granting waivers. Schools in those states are likely being granted a free pass as students are getting short-changed.

The state education department can scrutinize the quality of waivers being granted as part of the auditing process instituted with the overhaul of the graduation rate formula. It should be zealous in doing so. Legislators should also give the power over granting waivers to the department in order to ensure that they are rarely granted.

Tightening the waiver standards, including raising the grade-point average required to get one, is key. Requiring more evidence that the student is actually doing well academically is a must.

Eliminating the work-readiness waiver would do a great service in removing a loophole that misleads students about what it takes to be prepared for productive citizenship.

The state is already struggling to end its culture of low educational expectations. Further degrading is unacceptable.



RUSS PULLIAM

Coach uses pulpit like a pro

He doesn't stand behind a pulpit, and he doesn't have a seminary degree. He's not even ordained as a preacher.

Yet Colts coach Tony Dungy is doing some good preaching these days.

He is making the rounds in promoting his book "Quiet Strength," appearing on national TV shows, autographing the book at stores. He winds up his tour today, with training camp starting Sunday.

His book has jumped to number two on the New York Times Best Sellers list for nonfiction and fourth on the Wall Street Journal list. Perhaps ironically,

he's running pretty well ahead of atheist Christopher Hitchens, whose recent release is titled: "God Is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything."

Without getting in anyone's face, Dungy is

preaching to a larger audience than even pastors in mega-churches enjoy on a busy Sunday.

He manages to do it in a low-key manner, even when his message violates some canons of political correctness.

He believes that Jesus Christ is God, not just a nice teacher of ethics. He thinks the Bible has the answers to the problem of human suffering. He thinks fathers play a vital role in the lives of their children and ought to spend more time with them. He's really sort of old-fashioned in a nice way.

His book, though, isn't attracting many complaints or controversy.

His teams win football games and that overcomes a multitude of sins in America.

He's personally humble and his Christian faith is genuine. He quietly helps people in need, visiting prisoners and doing other good works without telling anyone about them.

Dungy is also a rather private person, especially for someone in so much of the limelight. In the book, for example, he doesn't tell stories about his children, and someday they will probably very thankful that he kept them out of the spotlight.

He's not just protecting his children. On those personality tests he would be scored as an introvert.

His wife, Lauren, learned that when a Pittsburgh-area pastor, John Guest, tried to set them up on a date. They were wary of each other. He wondered why a young lady in a large church would need to meet him, an NFL assistant coach.

She had her own bias against football: "My job was actually a mark against me in her book," he writes. "Her brothers had played football, and she didn't care for the way girls had chased them all throughout high school simply because they were athletes."

But once they met, she realized he was much more than a football jock, and he overcame any shyness.

In between such personal stories Dungy reviews a lot of football history, from his time in rebuilding the Tampa team to getting fired there, only to get picked up quickly by Colts owner Jim Irsay in 2002.

There may be more football than non-fans would want in the book. But the personal lessons offer some very good sermons in-between.

Pro sports are more important than they should be in America. Dungy thinks his relatives in the medical field do more important work than he does. But Dungy points people beyond the world of sports to more important matters - faith and family.

He's been given a pulpit through his football success, and he is using it very well.

What he's preaching in the book works because it matches his example. That example will be more important in the long run than any number of Super Bowl victories.

★ Pulliam is associate editor of The Star. Contact him at (317) 444-6001 or at russell.pulliam@indystar.com.

Foreign policy rookie makes public gaffe

For Barack Obama, it was strike two. And this one was a right-down-the-middle question from a YouTuber in Monday night's South Carolina debate: "Would you be willing to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea?"

"I would," responded Obama.

His explanation dug him even deeper: "The notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them - which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration - is ridiculous."

From The Nation's David Corn to super-blogger Mickey Kaus, a near audible gasp. For Hillary Clinton, next in line at the debate, an unmissable opportunity. She pounced: "I will not promise to meet with the leaders of these countries during my first year." And she then proceeded to give the reasons any graduate student could tick off: You don't want to be used for their propaganda. You need to know their intentions. Such meetings can make the situation worse.



CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER

Just to make sure no one missed how the grizzled veteran showed up the clueless rookie, the next day Clinton told the Quad-City Times of Davenport, Iowa, that Obama's comment "was irresponsible and frankly naive."

To be on the same stage as the leader of the world's greatest power is of course a prize.

Moreover, summits can also be traps if they're not wired in advance for success, such as Nixon's trip to China, for which Henry Kissinger had already largely hammered out the famous Shanghai communiqué. You don't go hoping for the best.

Obama may not have known he made an error, but his staff sure did. In the post-debate spin room, his closest

adviser, David Axelrod, was already backpedaling, pretending that Obama had been talking about diplomacy and not summitry with rogue state leaders.

Obama enthusiasts might want to write this off as a solitary slip. Except that this was the second time. The first occurred in another unscripted moment. During the April 26 South Carolina candidates' debate, Brian Williams asked what kind of change in the U.S. military posture abroad Obama would order in response to a hypothetical al-Qaida strike on two American cities.

Obama's answer: "Well, the first thing we would have to do is make sure that we've got an effective emergency response - something that this administration failed to do when we had a hurricane in New Orleans."

Asked to be commander in chief, Obama could only play first-responder in chief. Caught off guard, and without his advisers, he simply slipped into two automatic talking points: emergency response and its corollary - the obligatory Katrina Bush-bash.

When the same question came to Hillary, she again pounced: "I think a president must move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate." Retaliatory attack

did not come up in Obama's 200-word meander into multilateralism and intelligence gathering.

These gaffes lead to one of two conclusions: (1) Obama is inexplicably unable to think on his feet while standing on South Carolina soil, or (2) Obama is not ready to be a wartime president.

After Sept. 11, as during the Cold War, the country demands a serious commander in chief. It is hard to imagine that with all the electoral tides running in their favor, the Democrats would risk it all by nominating a novice for a wartime presidency.

Do the Democrats want to risk strike three, another national security question blown, but this time perhaps in a final presidential debate before the '08 election, rather than a midseason intraparty cattle call? The country might decide that it prefers, yes, a Republican - say, 9/11 veteran Rudy Giuliani - to a freshman senator who does not instinctively understand why an American president does not share the honor of his office with a malevolent clown like Hugo Chavez.

★ Krauthammer is a Washington Post columnist. Contact him at letters@charleskrauthammer.com.