



Quote of the week
 "You know, whenever you want to do something that's not the norm, people look at you like, 'Nobody does that! It will fail miserably. What do you mean? That's ridiculous!' And you need to be like, 'This is part of who I am, and whether other people have done it or not is really not my concern. It's only that it feels right to me.' You really have to believe in yourself, or people will make you waver."
 — Jennifer Lopez, on daring to be different.

Self-esteem overload

Critics say teaching worth can be taken too far

By CARA NISSMAN

When Christine Ward answers a question incorrectly in class, she's rarely told directly that she's wrong. "My teachers always say, 'That's a good answer. I can tell you tried your best on that,'" said Ward, 13, a seventh-grader at Linden Middle School in Malden. "Then they help us understand how we got our answer and explain the real answer." Stephanie Anastopoulos also has experienced the gentler side of teaching. "Teachers don't want to tell you bluntly that you're wrong," said Anastopoulos, 18, a Danvers High senior. "In high school, they try to make a joke out of it and

say, 'That's not the answer I was looking for' to make sure you're comfortable and that no one makes fun of you. I'm the valedictorian, so maybe there's some respect level or they don't want to hurt my feelings." Think she's kidding? Nope. Along with teaching the three R's, a lot of teachers are educating their teenage students on self-esteem, healthy body image and appropriate behavior. "Even if you go back to Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' you can see the effects of a lack of self-esteem on Ophelia," said Leslie Lane, a Danvers High English and multicultural studies teacher. "You can integrate it quite easily into the curriculum." Maybe a little too easily, according to some who think the self-esteem movement has gone too far. Charles Sykes, author of the 1995 book "Dumbing

Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good about Themselves but Can't Read, Write or Add" (St. Martin's Press) writes that contemporary education is an "outcome-based, gender-neutral, self-esteem-centered, 'feel-good learning.'" "It's almost part of the curriculum, it's taught so much," said Anastopoulos. "I think it's needed in school. But parents also should be doing it because it's the way you're brought up that you're going to act (later on)." Many teachers say that if they don't teach kids about self-confidence, nobody will. "A lot of people are critical of spending too much time not educating, but people have to be willing to stand up for students," said Lane. "With so many kids with both parents working, we're put in a position. Where else are they going to get it (self-worth) from? They're not going to get it from 'Dawson's Creek' or 'Felicity.' If they're not learning it in school or after-school programs, where are they going to get it from?" To Lane, self-esteem is more than feeling good about yourself. It's understanding that things aren't always going to go your way, and knowing that you can survive disappointment and move on without hurting yourself or others. "When these kids are 50, they're not going to remember how to diagram a sentence or do fractions," she said. "It's most important that they learn how to treat other people like human beings in the workplace. It's not about being all soft and learning how to love everybody and be touchy-feely, but learning how to function appropriately. It's important to be a good human being and be educated." To build a kid's self-confidence, adults must figure out what he's good at and encourage him to pursue that activity. But it's tough to figure out what teens are good at when they're striving to fit in with their peers, said Linden school principal Camille Colantuoni. "My dad always tells me that I shouldn't care what other people think and just live my life," said Varandt Khodaverdian, 13, a Linden seventh-grader. "It's sometimes hard."

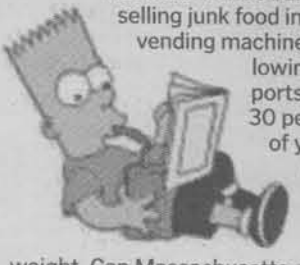
Allie Keough said she thinks teens should just try out lots of different activities, without worrying about whether they're good at them. "I do a lot of sports," said Keough, 13, also a Linden seventh-grader. "I'm not really great at them, but I still do them because I enjoy them." Wouldn't teachers who lack resources and support from their students' parents be tempted to inflate kids' grades to help them feel special? "You can't just give students good grades," said Colantuoni. "You have to work at it. You need to find a way for them to achieve. You want self-esteem to be based on reality and not gifts, because at some point reality hits, and that can be devastating. You can't set a child up for failure." Anastopoulos said she thinks she's prepared for the future, but recognizes that a lot of her classmates don't realize how much work they're about to face. "There seems to be a lot of people who are immature," she said. "I think they'll get a wake-up call in college."

What's up? Tell Cara Nissman at cnissman@bostonherald.com.

Who knew?

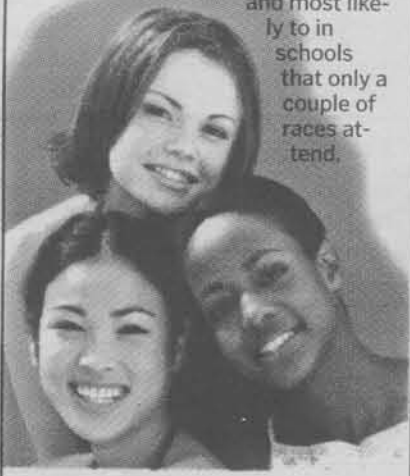
Forget Butterfingers

Bart Simpson wouldn't like living in Oakland, Calif. The Oakland school district recently began the nation's first districtwide ban on selling junk food in school vending machines, following reports that 30 percent of young Californians are overweight. Can Massachusetts schools be far behind? With only 7 percent of teens overweight, according to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, only widening belts will tell.



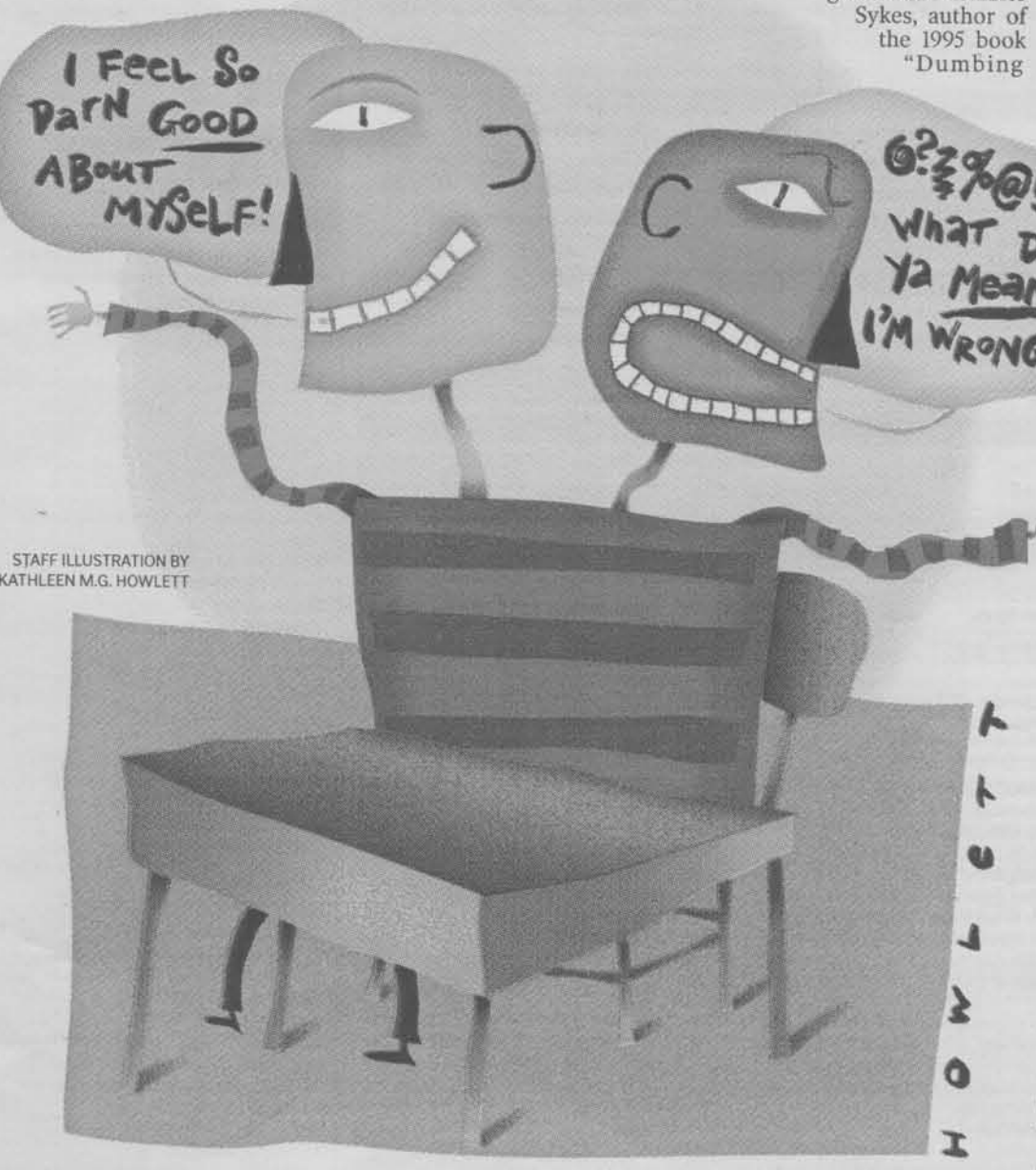
Friends of a feather

Not that you need a study to tell you this because you see it every day in your cafeteria, but, according to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, teens are more likely to choose friends from within their racial group in moderately racially mixed schools. The researchers found that, after accounting for the opportunities for interracial friendships in schools, the odds of a teen naming a kid of the same race as a pal were about two times the odds of naming a friend from a different racial group. Kids are least likely to segregate themselves in highly diverse schools, where several ethnicities are represented, found the study, and most likely to in schools that only a couple of races attend.



Good read

Berry can't stand discussing her feelings, or anything else, with her father, who always got along better with Berry's older sister, Laura, especially after their parents divorced. But when Dad plans a trip to South Africa for Berry and he to attend Laura's memorial service after she is murdered, Berry must learn to let go of her resentment and face up to her feelings of pain and loss. With remarkably realistic, rapid dialogue between this reluctant duo, and colorful descriptions of South Africa and its struggles, Carolyn Coman gives "Many Stones" (Puffin, 2000) moral and literary weight far beyond its 158 pages.



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