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They earn as they learn

By Anne Stuhldreher

Los Angeles philanthropist Eli Broad has probably never met Soledad Moya, an eighth-grader at Middle School 302 in the South Bronx. But both are big believers in an approach that has people wringing their hands and wagging their fingers: paying students to perform on standardized tests. Moya's school is a 45-minute subway ride from the Manhattan hotel where Broad took the stage at last month's Clinton Global Initiative to announce a $6-million grant to help launch EdLabs — an initiative at Harvard University to advance innovations in public schools.

EdLab's first order of business is to determine if Spark — the pilot financial incentive program at Moya's school and 58 others in New York City — leads to concrete improvements in academic achievement. Seventh-graders can earn up to $50 a test — for 10 assessment tests throughout the year. There's a similar program for fourth-graders. The money goes into a bank account that only the student can access. The better you do, the more money you earn, up to $500 a year for seventh-graders. The idea is to make school tangible for disadvantaged kids — short-term rewards that are in their long-term best interest.

Is it working? That depends on whom you ask.

Pundits and some in the media say Spark is bribing kids; they should love learning for learning's sake. But if you talk with those actually participating in the pilot program — the students, administrators and teachers — you hear something different.

Moya said she wasn't a "studying kind of" person before the awards. Now she and her friends like to look in the dictionary and memorize words and their definitions, and they ask their teachers for more practice tests. Even though she's not eligible for the awards now that she's in eighth grade, she's still studying harder before tests, she said. "Once you get started with something, you keep doing it."

The changes she saw in students like Moya caused Lisa Cullen — a literacy and social studies teacher at the school — to go from skeptic to supporter: "I saw how it takes away the uphill battle you have trying to get students to study for tests." She saw a definite increase in students' excitement, enthusiasm and effort.

That's no small feat when test-taking ranks low on the priority list of students whose lives are crammed with adult responsibilities, Cullen said. "The ideal would be for every kid to love learning, but that's impossible in today's world." One of Cullen's students is 10 minutes late every day because she takes two subway trains and a bus to get her little brother to school. She then has to watch him after school until her mom gets back from her third job. "She and all my students are so stressed all the time."

Principal Angel Rodriguez believes the Spark incentives will get the biggest results with the most challenging students — whom he calls "the bottom third." Rodriguez said virtually all of his students struggle with poverty, and many live in one of the 18 nearby homeless shelters. "I can't tell you how many times I've had parents in my office that are high on heroin or crack, or reek of alcohol," he said.

Despite these challenges, test scores rose substantially last year for seventh-graders at the school. Rodriguez thinks the Spark incentives were a big factor. The percentage of seventh-graders meeting the state standards for English-language arts rose 12 points over the previous year's scores. For math standards, the gain was 15 percentage points.

Rodriguez has no patience for the critics. "Thank God my father didn't listen to them," said Rodriguez, who grew up a few blocks from the school. "He had to use what he had to motivate me." He would tell Rodriguez he could get a new pair of Converse sneakers if he got a 90 on an upcoming test, Rodriguez said. "Guess what I got on that test?"

Parents at the school feel the same way. "Not one parent complained," Rodriguez said. "One hundred percent said, 'Sign me up.' "

Spark's creators have been fielding calls from all over the country, but surprisingly not from California. That's too bad. California has one of the country's widest achievement gaps. That's because, according to a new report from UC Berkeley, unlike in most states, the majority of California's public students are from lower-achieving groups — Latinos, African Americans and English-language learners — or the "bottom third," whom Rodriguez thinks Spark will help the most.

EdLab's evaluation of Spark will come out in 2009. California educators should look beyond the rhetoric and examine this approach. We can't afford to dismiss it outright. As Rodriguez said, "What price do you place on a seventh-grader whose lack of motivation is leading to failure?"

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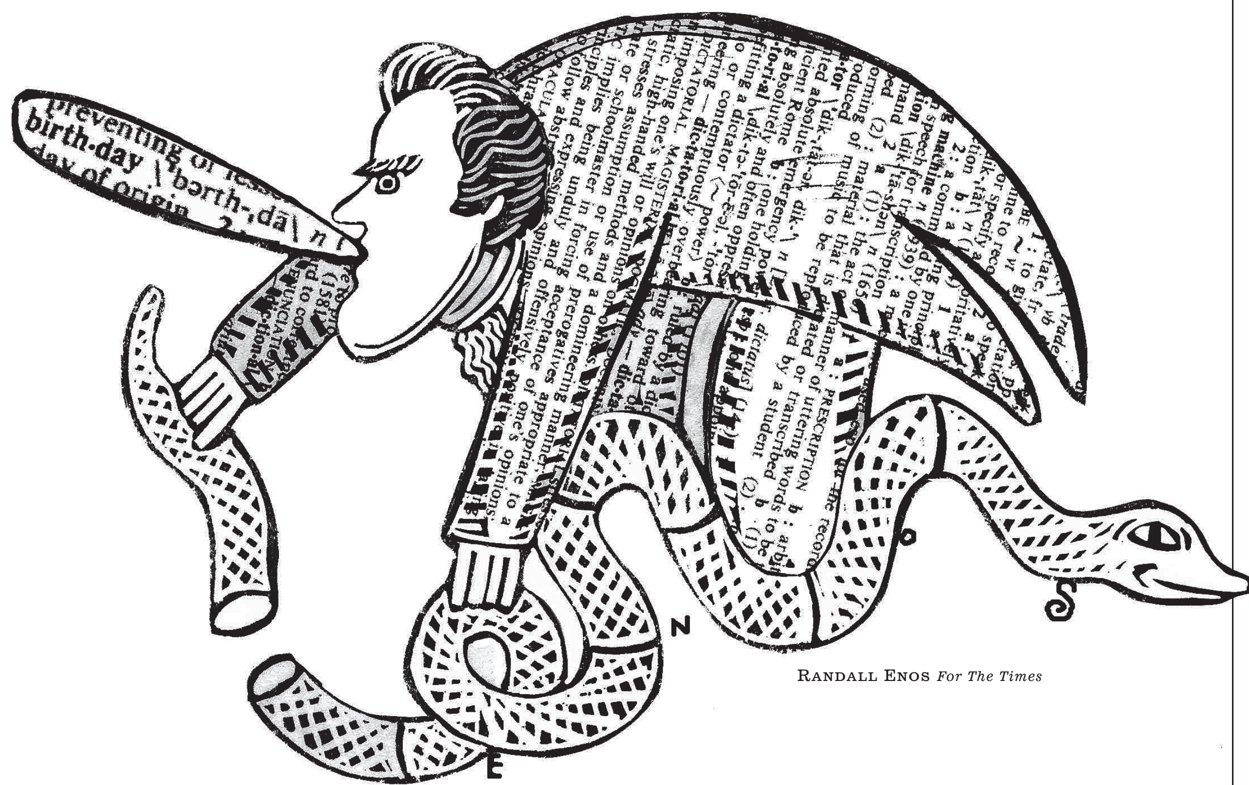

Randall Enos *For The Times*

The definition of Yankee know-how

By Joshua Kendall

Were it not for Noah Webster Jr., the farm boy from West Hartford, Conn., who would have been 250 on Thursday, Americans might all be reading their newspapers from back to front today.

As the War for Independence was winding down, the linguistic future of the United States was up for grabs. After all, the English of King George III had suddenly become the tongue of the oppressor. And roughly one-quarter of the new nation's 3 million citizens were not native English speakers. Some Americans sought to replace English with German, then spoken by nearly 10% of the population, and others advocated more radical options, including right-to-left reading in Hebrew.

In 1783, Webster, then a recent Yale graduate eking out a living as a schoolteacher, put an immediate end to the charged debate. His rhetorical tool was a tiny textbook, just 6¼ inches long and 3½ inches wide, which made the case for an American brand of English.

In his so-called blue-backed speller, Webster issued a linguistic declaration of independence: "This country must, in some future time, be as distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions." His book was the first published in the new United States, and Webster traveled to state capitals across the country to lobby for the nation's first copyright laws. He also invented the modern book tour and publicized his work with blurbs from eminent authorities (many of which he wrote himself).

> **Americans owe their unity of language to Noah Webster.**

By the end of the 19th century, nearly 100 million copies of Webster's Elementary Spelling Book would be sold. In contrast to most European countries, where regional dialects hold considerable sway, the United States has never been divided by language. Even on the eve of the Civil War, leading secessionist Jefferson Davis acknowledged that "we have a unity of language which no other people possess, and we owe this unity above all to Noah Webster's Yankee spelling book."

Yet the speller marked just the beginning of Webster's six-decade literary career. His treatise, "Sketches of American Policy," published in 1785, formulated several of the key principles that later worked their way into the Constitution, such as the need for "a supreme power at the head of the union." At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Webster emerged as George Washington's personal policy wonk, at whose hotel room door the general would come knocking. In 1793, Webster became editor of New York City's first daily newspaper, the American Minerva, the Federalist Party organ that helped Washington keep the United States out of another war with Britain.

While Webster would dabble in other fields, including epidemiology, statistics and philosophy, his crowning achievement would be his dictionary, to which he devoted the second half of his life. In 1806, he published his Compendious Dictionary of the American Language, a spelling dictionary in which he first made many of the changes for which he has become famous, such as axing the "u" in "colour" and the "k" in "musick."

It was 22 more years before he unveiled An American Dictionary of the English Language — though he took time during breaks from composing definitions to found Amherst College and serve as a representative in the Massachusetts General Court. This was his magnum opus, containing about 70,000 words, nearly twice as many as in Samuel Johnson's 1755 masterpiece. (One word, "demoralize," was of Webster's own coinage.)

While Johnson had the soul of a poet, Webster had a scientific sensibility. He officially introduced into the English language all the new concepts of the Enlightenment. What's more, he brought remarkable analytic power to lexicography. As James Murray, the first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, would later write, Webster "was a born definer of words." Unlike the speller, the dictionary didn't bring in much money during his lifetime, but it immediately received praise from around the world. By the early 1830s, even British courts were citing Webster's as the dictionary of record.

Webster's flaming red hair and remarkably erect bearing made him a striking figure. He wore long-tailed coats and frilled shirts long after they went out of style. Though devoted to his seven children, Webster was largely a loner and spent most of his days in his study. Of Webster's major character flaw, most of his contemporaries concurred that it was "unbounded vanity." Webster was always talking himself up. When the famous physician Benjamin Rush once greeted him with the salutation, "I congratulate you on your arrival in Philadelphia," Webster is reported to have shot back, "You may, if you please, sir, congratulate Philadelphia upon the occasion!"

But Webster's quirky personality was well suited to his chosen vocation, lexicography. Without his legendary grandiosity, he never would have taken it upon himself to unite Americans with his words.

Joshua Kendall is the author of "The Man Who Made Lists: Love, Death, Madness and the Creation of Roget's Thesaurus." He is working on a biography of Noah Webster.

'Muslim' shouldn't be a slur

By Constance L. Rice

Excuse me, but when did the words "Muslim" and "Arab" become acceptable epithets?

I'm not a Muslim, and perhaps I was slow to see this coming. Four months ago, I blithely advised a group at a local mosque not to obsess over the anti-Muslim undertones of the presidential campaign. At that point, Barack Obama was defending his Christian bona fides against "accusations" of "being a Muslim" (as if it had suddenly become a Class-D felony), but was doing so without condemning the implicit slurs against Islam, Muslims and Arabs.

In a "don't worry, be happy" tone, I breezily noted that although the stoking of racial fear and xenophobia was a cherished tradition of American politics, I really didn't think that this time around the candidates would permit the wholesale slander of Islam or Muslims.

Apparently, I was wrong. The undertones have become screaming overtones. And it is past time to object.

If it wasn't clear before, it became crystal clear last week in the aftermath of Republican rallies. Fomenting fear to shore up drooping support, Republicans sadly used heated demagoguery about "palling around with terrorists," about "Barack *Hussein* Obama" and about how Obama doesn't "see America like you and I," words that mixed subliminally to conflate "terror" with "Muslim" and to whip crowds into xenophobic anger. After his enraged supporters were recorded uttering death threats and racial slurs, McCain was forced on several occasions to try to tamp down the anger in the audience and to defend his opponent.

That was a good step one — until McCain blew it. A woman stood up in the audience and said that she just couldn't trust Obama because, as she put it, "he's an Arab." McCain shook his head, took the microphone and said: "No, ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues."

So, what is he saying? Arabs aren't decent family men? They can't be citizens?

The fact is, neither McCain nor Obama — who continues to combat absurd attacks on his Americanness — has been willing to speak out against the implicit slurs against Arabs and Islam.

Is it really too difficult for Obama to respond: "For the hundredth time, I am a Christian, and if you are suggesting that there is something wrong with Islam or being a Muslim, you are wrong"?

Would it be so hard for McCain to say: "There is no room in my campaign or in America for religious or ethnic intolerance — that's what we're fighting against"?

Maybe I missed the denunciations amid all the hoopla over field-dressing moose, but it looks like the next ice age will arrive before the NAACP, the National Conference of Christians and Jews or the Anti-Defamation League loudly objects to the implicit defamation of Muslims and Arabs that has seeped into this presidential campaign.

Women rightly protested gender bias during Hillary Clinton's run, but we failed to strongly challenge the earlier bias against Mormons during Mitt Romney's bid, and we are currently failing to refute the anti-Muslim bias embedded in the assaults on Obama.

It is a failure we need to correct now.

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TIM RUTTEN

Fire, the price we pay

Eight thousand years ago, the Tongva and Tataviam peoples, who made their homes in what we now call the Los Angeles Basin and the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys, did exactly what many of us have been doing for the last few days: They inhaled the bone-dry air of a wind-scoured fall afternoon and watched the hillsides above them burn.

The smoky conflagrations they witnessed — more than 5 millenniums before the first European sailed up the California coast — were, even then, an annual ritual of nature so ancient and reliable that it had set its evolutionary stamp on the chaparral itself, giving rise to species of plants whose seeds require the heat of wildfires to germinate.

Then, as now, the sequence of events was the same. Santa Ana winds blowing off the high desert to the sea suck the moisture from the late season grasses, brush and light forest upslope and turn them into tinder. A spark occurs. The first such fires were no doubt caused by lightning, though there's evidence to show that the early Amerindians here, as in other parts of North America, often set fires themselves — just as we now do, sometimes by accident, too often by design.

High winds spread the embers and, depending on the ground cover and gusts, burn until they reach a limit set by nature — or, nowadays, by man through the mechanism of modern fire suppression.

What the Uto-Aztecan-speaking Tongva and Tataviam never had to put up with is the torrent of self-righteous abuse that now follows each fall's wildfire season as inevitably as rain and mudslides.

The bigger the fire and the greater the losses, the higher the wave of rhetorical censure. Our annual struggle with wildfires inevitably looses a flood of essays on the essential hubris of unnatural Los Angeles, a city that insists on sprawling beyond its naturally appointed limits and on building where it ought never to build — on hillsides, in canyons, on flood plains and at the seashore.

Arrogant defiance of nature, the argument goes, inevitably brings disaster — and well-deserved disaster at that. (It's interesting to recall that our worst single fire preceded urbanization. During the last week of September, the Great Fire of 1889 burned more than 300,000 acres in northern San Diego County and southern Orange County, killing thousands of sheep and destroying the unharvested barley crop.)

Putting aside for the moment the simple historical fact that our natural disasters — earthquakes, floods and droughts, as well as fires — predate development, there is another way to look at this. Alone among the world's great cities, Los Angeles does not exist at the confluence of great rivers, on the shore of a fine natural harbor or astride some important traditional trade route. It never was the historical seat of some great power.

It exists because it has a magnificent climate and a fascinatingly beautiful natural setting, and because a bunch of ruthless, steely-eyed guys with their avarice on overdrive realized that they could get rich selling good weather and open space, if they willed a city into being.

They succeeded beyond even their counting-house fantasies; the result was Los Angeles, which is unique among the world's great cities in that — until the construction of Disney Hall and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels — it lacked a single inarguably distinguished public building but possessed the world's finest store of fine domestic architecture.

The city that the newcomers made of the developers' ambitions is preeminently a city of private lives rather than public spaces. It also is one in which people live more intimately intertwined with nature than any other urban population, though that intimacy exposes them to everything from wildfires to the odd hungry mountain lion.

Our sprawling suburbs — the despair of generation after generation of enlightened planners — also happen to provide the best lower-, middle- and working-class housing of any metropolis in the world. A detached house with a bit of garden to enjoy remains an unattainable dream for most of the globe's population.

Dealing with the fires, floods and quakes that are part of this environment — albeit on a scale unimagined in most other cities — is part of the price we pay for reaping the very considerable day-to-day benefits, spiritual as well as economic, from this arrangement.

And if our sprawling suburbs look to many of us these days like simply way too much of a good thing, it's worth recalling that the phrase only occurs to those who've already got theirs.

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