

Any color you like — Recently, Superior Court Judge Robert Freedman suspended the California high school exit exam, holding that withholding diplomas somehow violated the rights of those who flunked the test. Here is the ideology of compassion in action: because we feel sorry for those who fail, we desire to cover up that failure by handing out diplomas to everyone. In our fantasy compassion world, all children are winners, so all must have prizes. And although a higher court has stayed Judge Freedman's order, it seems likely that the compassion ideologues will win eventually.

The free market may offer a solution. One of the purposes for issuing

continued on page 31

high school diplomas is to convey information to potential employers that a graduate has mastered crucial verbal and quantitative skills at the 12th-grade level. But like any other pricing mechanism or currency, this one can be rendered useless by inflation. The whole reason the exit exam was mandated in the first place is precisely that rampant grade inflation made possession of a high school diploma increasingly less informative about whether a graduate had mastered the core competencies. Stories of students who had graduated yet were unable to read their diplomas were dramatic illustrations of the general problem.

Since the judge, either because he's blinded by compassion or is himself a product of grade-inflated schools, has commanded that all high school graduates get diplomas, I suggest that we color-code the documents.

A red diploma would be given to any student who graduated from high school but couldn't pass the exit exam. It might also be given a different name, perhaps a "certificate of mere

course completion." This would inform potential employers that the student has done enough to graduate — mainly, has "passed" enough classes without killing any teachers or burning any schools — but cannot read, write, or compute at the severely minimal level that is required by the existing exam.

Those who graduate and pass the exit exam would be given yellow certificates, which would still be called "diplomas." These would enable employers to tell at a glance that an applicant possessed a certain level of educational attainment. They would have the additional benefit of allowing any student who, despite this attainment, still cannot read his diploma to figure out what it means by simply observing the color code.

Then let the market decide. For some jobs — say, purely manual labor or working in a government bureaucracy — a red diploma might be all an employer would require. For most other jobs, the prospective employer would likely require a yellow one. The difference would show up in the wages paid. (Yellow diploma jobs would obviously pay higher wages.)

continued on page 45

Reflections, *from page 31*

Students could decide for themselves about the extra effort needed to pass the exit exam. Pay your penny and take your choice: do the work and get a higher-paying job, or refuse to improve your skills and accept a lower income. Just don't snivel, or sue over a simple test.

This color-coding could be taken farther. The current high school exit exam is actually geared to the 10th-grade level; truth be told, it should be characterized as being set at the 9th-grade level, or even (in math) at the 8th-grade level. Perhaps we ought to structure the exam so it can discriminate between those who have reached the ostensible grade level for graduation (which is the 12th grade, of course) and those whose education really stands at a lower grade. We could give the authentically 12th-grade students a green or "grade level" diploma. This traffic-light color scheme would be maximally informative to employers and parents, and to the students themselves. Perhaps even judges who are mentally disabled by compassionate emotions could grasp the rudiments of the system.

— Gary Jason