

ValleyViews

AlmadenTimes

Jeanne C. Carbone

jeanne@timesmediainc.com
(408) 494-7000 ex. 216
Editor

**Lorraine Gabbert
Sheila Sanchez**

Senior Staff Writers

**Ramona Gwargis
Shana McLean Moore
Joe Proudman**

Staff Writers

Luke Cunningham

Intern

Donald DeVries

Columnist

Lisa Martel

Copy Editor

Jeff Baham

(408) 494-7000 ex. 202
graphics@timesmediainc.com
Art Director

Jamie Eidschun

jamie@timesmediainc.com
(408) 494-7000 ex. 224
Graphic Artist

Valentino Esquivel

(408) 494-7000 ex. 207
val@timesmediainc.com
Sales Associate

Linda Mancuso

(408) 494-7000 ex. 218
linda@timesmediainc.com
Account Executive

Candy Richter

(408) 494-7000 ex. 225
candy@timesmediainc.com
Calendar Editor

Sandy Bellor

(408) 494-7100
Chief Financial Officer

William Bellor

(408) 494-7000 ex. 201
william@timesmediainc.com
Publisher/CEO

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What we lose in winning the API Test Score race

By Ole Jorgenson
Special to the Times

According to the latest Academic Performance Index (API) test results for Silicon Valley, our schools are among the best in the state.

To achieve perpetually better test scores each year as is mandated by the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, teachers in successful schools like Leroy Anderson Elementary will "try anything" to raise scores, as the school's principal stated recently in an interview with a local newspaper. In schools across Silicon Valley, the same single-minded determination to raise API scores feeds a relentless focus on teaching to the test that, to the dismay of teachers, builds only low-level skills like memorization and recall — at a tremendous cost to our community and future.

Researchers have long demonstrated that success on standardized tests depends on independent variables like a child's socioeconomic status and the level of education of her or his parents — factors that have nothing to do with the quality of schools or teachers. As education expert Alfie Kohn often tells conference audiences, "The single best predictor of success on a standardized test is a child's zip code." Children of affluent and educated parents are the best test takers. No amount of school improvement will impact the root societal causes of the "achievement gap," although our pub-

lic schools are investing unimaginable amounts of time, tax revenues and effort to make a difference.

Whatever your opinion about the API test results in the news, NCLB is the law of the land. As long as its mandates require that our schools, teachers and children be judged by the outcome of a single annual multiple-guess exam, schools and teachers and children will continue to be compared (and labeled) according to test scores alone.

Most educators and many parents know that authentic learning involves much more than perpetually-improving test results. To argue that a child's learning can be represented in one test score is rather like saying a doctor can determine a patient's overall health using only a tongue depressor.

What don't API scores measure? They don't measure a child's creative ability. They don't require children to research, explain, debate, elaborate, argue, present, rebut or improvise. They don't demand public speaking skills. They don't reflect decades of research demonstrating that children come to school with an array of individual learning styles and as many as nine different types of "intelligence," only one or two of which can be measured by a paper-and-pencil test.

And there's a bit of irony in that the innovative, pioneering thought that is so valued in Silicon Valley is not captured on any of these

standardized tests, where there can be only one right answer to every problem. Memorizing and regurgitating facts for a multiple-guess exam — what we educators call "sit-get-spit-forget" — is most definitely not preparation for entrepreneurial leadership.

API scores are useful because they are measurable. We all want schools to be accountable, and test scores make accountability easy to quantify. Realtors selling houses in "high API neighborhoods" love the scores. Politicians decrying the state of public education brandish stagnant or low API scores as "proof" of the decay of our system. For parents and children, Silicon Valley's fixation on test scores obscures what teachers must omit from their lessons today — namely, the exercises in critical thinking and creative analysis and unconventional problem solving that are not tested.

Our API obsession does nothing to improve teaching and learning in our schools, and the costs are staggering. Ultimately, great schools are measured not by the accomplishments of their students, but by the lives their graduates live. With all that standardized tests subtract from the learning process, in our hysterical march toward high API scores, we fail to prepare today's students to lead extraordinary lives.

Ole Jorgenson is the head of school at Almaden Country School.

Steinway Society of the Bay Area's piano series

Naughton Twins to perform in San Jose

Christine and Michelle Naughton are identical twins who are creating a sensation in the world of duo piano recitals and symphony concert appearances nationwide. The Naughton twins will appear at Le Petit Trianon in San Jose, Saturday, Nov. 14 at 7:30 p.m.

Recipients of scholarships from The Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, the Naughton twins have received rave reviews from critics and public alike. Their program will feature, among others, Mozart, Chopin, Haydn and Ravel.

Christina made her orchestral debut at the age of nine performing Haydn's Piano Concerto No. 11 in D Major. She was the bronze medalist at the quadrennial Gina Bachauer Young Artist International Piano



Competition, and as a member of the Vesta Trio won the gold medal at the Fischhof National Chamber Music Competition. She has performed with Chicago's Ars Viva and Park Ridge Orchestras, the Madison Symphony, the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, the Fort Collins Symphony, the Utah Symphony, and at Ravinia's Martin Theater.

Michelle made her orchestral debut at the age of 10 performing Mozart's Piano Concerto in A Major K488. She won first prize at the PianoArts Biennial National Piano Concerto and Solo Competition,

and was the gold medal winner in the quadrennial Virginia Waring International Piano Competition. She has performed with the Milwaukee Symphony, the Madison Symphony, Chicago's Ars Viva and Park Ridge Symphonies, the Gulf Coast Symphony, as well as on Denver's St. John's Cathedral's concert series, and at the Green Lake Music Festival.

Christina and Michelle have performed with Cleveland's Red Orchestra, the Erie Philharmonic, the Gulf Coast Symphony, Chicago's Park Ridge Orchestra, the Sheboygan Symphony, as well as on the Artist Series of Sarasota, the UAB Piano Series, the Rancho Mirage Library Classical Piano Series, the Chamber Music San Francisco Series, and on Chicago's "Music in the Loft" and Pianoforte classical piano series. They have performed for broadcast on WFMT, Chicago; and on WHY, Philadelphia. This past season included debuts at the Terrace Theater in

Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center, and with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts. Upcoming concerts include performances with the New Jersey Symphony and at Florida's Kravis Center.

Founded in 1994, Steinway Society-The Bay Area is a non-profit volunteer-based presenting organization offering a unique set of piano recitals in an intimate setting. The series offers seven piano recitals per season by professional artists, many of whom are winners of international competitions. The Steinway Society strives to bring in a variety of programs in order to increase local exposure and encourage appreciation of piano music in all its many forms: classical, jazz, 1920s, modern and internationally themed arrangements. Subscriptions are sold in sets of seven or four. Individual tickets are also available.

Tickets are \$30 to \$45, and are available by calling 286-2620 extension 23. For more information, visit www.steinwaythebayarea.com.

Have an opinion?

Let the Almaden Times hear from you! Send your letters to Managing Editor Jeanne Carbone at jeanne@timesmediainc.com or via postal mail to: The Almaden Times Weekly, 1310 Tully Road, Ste. 112, San Jose, CA 95122

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