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Are Kids Too Coddled?  
By FRANK BRUNI

AT a middle school near Boston not long ago, teachers and administrators noticed that children would frequently return from a classmate's weekend bar mitzvah with commemorative T-shirts, swag that advertised a party to which many fellow students hadn't been invited.

So administrators moved to ban the clothing.

They explained, in a letter to parents, that "while the students wearing the labeled clothing are all chatting excitedly," the students without it "tend to walk by, trying not to take notice." What an ordeal.

Many parents favored the ban, a prophylactic against disappointment.

Some did not, noting that life would soon enough deal the kids much worse blows along these lines. And one observer, in a Facebook thread, said this, according to a local TV station's report: "Perhaps they should dress the children in Bubble Wrap and tie mattresses to their backs so they don't get hurt."

I assume that's facetious.

But these days, you never know.

I occasionally flash on that anecdote as I behold the pushback against more rigorous education standards in general and the new Common Core curriculum in particular. And it came to mind when Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently got himself into a big mess.

Duncan, defending the Common Core at an education conference, identified some of its most impassioned opponents as "white suburban moms" who were suddenly learning that "their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good."

It was an impolitic bit of profiling. Gratuitous, too. But if you follow the fevered lamentations over the Common Core, look hard at some of the complaints from parents and teachers, and factor in the modern cult of self-esteem, you can guess what set Duncan off: a concern, wholly justified, that tougher instruction not be rejected simply because it makes children feel inadequate, and that the impulse to coddle kids not eclipse the imperative to challenge them.

The Common Core, a laudable set of guidelines that emphasize analytical thinking over rote memorization, has been adopted in more than 40 states. In instances its

implementation has been flawed, and its accompanying emphasis on testing certainly warrants debate.

What's not warranted is the willing hysteria: from right-wing alarmists, who hallucinate a federal takeover of education and the indoctrination of a next generation of government-loving liberals; from left-wing paranoiacs, who imagine some conspiracy to ultimately privatize education and create a new frontier of profits for money-mad plutocrats.

Then there's the outcry, equally reflective of the times, from adults who assert that kids aren't enjoying school as much; feel a level of stress that they shouldn't have to; are being judged too narrowly; and doubt their own mettle.

Aren't aspects of school supposed to be relatively mirthless? Isn't stress an acceptable byproduct of reaching higher and digging deeper? Aren't certain fixed judgments inevitable? And isn't mettle established through hard work?

Apparently not, to judge from some reactions to the Common Core in New York, which has been holding hearings on the guidelines.

One father said that while his 8-year-old son was "not the most book-smart kid," he was nonetheless "extremely bright." With the new instruction, however, too many kids were "being made to feel dumb." There was "no room for imagination or play," the father grouched. "All the kids are stressed out."

A SOCIAL WORKER testified that she'd been receiving calls and referrals regarding elementary-school students on the psychological skids. "They said they felt 'stupid' and school was 'too hard,'" she related. "They were throwing tantrums, begging to stay home and upset even to the point of vomiting." Additional cases included insomnia, suicidal thoughts and self-mutilation, she said, and she wondered aloud if this could all be attributed to the Common Core.

A teacher on Long Island did more than wonder, speaking out at a forum two weeks ago about what she called the Common Core Syndrome, a darkly blooming anxiety among students that's "directly related to work that they do in the classroom."

"If that's not child abuse, I don't know what is," she thundered, to wild applause. Then she endorsed the idea of parents' exempting kids from Common Core-related tests. "The mommies in New York," she concluded, "don't abuse their children."

If children are unraveling to this extent, it's a grave problem. But before we beat a hasty retreat from potentially crucial education reforms, we need to ask ourselves how much panic is trickling down to kids from their parents and whether we're paying the price of having insulated kids from blows to their egos and from the realization that not everyone's a winner in every activity on every day.

There are sports teams and leagues in which no kid is allowed too much more playing time than another and in which excessive victory margins are outlawed. Losing is looked upon as pure trauma, to be doled out gingerly. After one Texas high school football team beat another last month by a lopsided score of 91-0, the parent of a losing player filed a formal complaint of bullying against the winning team's coach.

It used to be that trophies went to victors; now, in many leagues, they go to everybody — for participation. Some teams no longer have one or two captains, elected by the other players, but a rotating cast, so that nobody's left out.

Some high schools have 10, 20 or 30 valedictorians, along with bloated honor rolls and a surfeit of graduation prizes. Many kids at all grade levels are Bubble-Wrapped in a culture that praises effort nearly as much as it does accomplishment.

And praise itself is promiscuous, though there are experts with profound reservations about that approach. They say it can lessen motivation and set children up to be demoralized when they invariably fail at something.

"Our students have an inflated sense of their academic prowess," wrote Marc Tucker, the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, in Education Week. "They don't expect to spend much time studying, but they confidently expect good grades and marketable degrees."

David Coleman, one of the principal architects of the Common Core, told me that he's all for self-esteem, but that rigorous standards "redefine self-esteem as something achieved through hard work."

"Students will not enjoy every step of it," he added. But if it takes them somewhere big and real, they'll discover a satisfaction that redeems the sweat.

And they'll be ready to compete globally, an ability that too much worry over their egos could hinder. As Tucker observed, "While American parents are pulling their kids out of tests because the results make the kids feel bad, parents in other countries are looking at the results and asking themselves how they can help their children do better."