

# Best of the NETWORKER

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The Northwest Youth Networker; newsletter of the [Northwest Network for Youth](#), edited by [Jerry Fest](#) of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#)

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### SMOKING SMARTIES

**The latest things kids have given adults to worry about ...**

By Jerry Fest

Don't know what I'm talking about? I'll let this young man fill you in ...

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIF0Q\\_QOUeE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIF0Q_QOUeE)

I have to admit, when I first heard of smoking Smarties, I thought it was a 2010 version of smoking banana peels – the mid-60's craze created by Donovan's song "Mellow Yellow." Based on the title of the song, and specifically the lines "Electrical banana is gonna be a sudden craze ... Electrical banana is bound to be the very next phase" young people all over America started drying out banana peels and smoking them to get high. Of course, they didn't get high ... possibly because "electrical banana" was later revealed by Donovan to be a reference to a yellow vibrator (perhaps it's best that we misunderstood). But, as it turns out, the smoking Smarties craze has nothing to do with getting high. It's just, well, kinda' *cool*.

Of course, adults don't think it's cool (see [Just Say No....to Smarties? Faux Smoking Has Parents Fuming](#)), and there is literal hand wringing about the issue. Everything from fears of a gateway activity to cigarette smoking, to a growing list of possible health concerns, to a variety of punitive responses both banning the activity and punishing offenders, is being debated across the nation. Yet I can't help feeling that this is just another example of responding to the symptom instead of the disease.

Look, do I advocate smoking Smarties? No. It's stupid ... but today's young people certainly don't have a corner on that market. If we're honest we'll admit that adults sit around all the time reminiscing about all the stupid things *we* did when we were kids. The question is; why do kids do stupid things? I'll give you two answers. First, it's *normal adolescent development*. Current research into brain development confirms that the executive functions of an adolescent brain (planning, decision-making, response control) are not fully developed until the mid-20's. What they *are* good at is creativity and risk taking, and this leads to my second answer. You see, if I'm bored and unengaged and uninvolved, and spend most of my time responding to adult direction as opposed to working *with* adults as a partner to improve my life, I'm gonna' start smoking Smarties ... or some other such stupid result of untapped creativity. That's right, I'm back on the Youth Development bandwagon, because I truly believe that if we focused on tapping into the creativity of youth rather than waiting until they come up with something and then figuring out how to ban it, both young people and adults would be better for the effort.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go satisfy a sudden craving for candy ...

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## Bytes Not Bans

### A creative solution to problem behaviors

By Jerry Fest

One of my pet peeves is how we so often seem to respond to almost every perceived problem behavior in young people with punitive measures, or simply declaring that the behavior is banned. That's why I'm sending out kudos to a school district in Vail, Arizona for using a different approach.

We all know what kind of nightmares can result from packing up to 70 or more kids into a big yellow box and rolling them down the highway with nothing to occupy their time. Even when I was a kid, a ride on a school bus was often more of a survival experience than a mode of transportation, and today's school bus drivers have to contend with behaviors ranging

from teasing and shouting, to punching and climbing over seats, to mooning and flipping off cars out the windows. Sounds like behaviors that are ready made for punitive measures, right?

Or, we could try a different approach. Maybe we could address the disease rather than the symptom. The symptom may be out-of-control behavior, but the disease is *boredom*. High energy kids packed onto a bus are acting out primarily because they're going stir-crazy. That's why the school district in Vail, Arizona created the Internet Bus.

School officials there have mounted a mobile internet router onto bus 92, which the kids have dubbed the Internet Bus, allowing students to surf the web while they ride to and from school and athletic activities (student athletes use the bus as an internet café at games). The result has been that previously rowdy bus rides have transformed into a study hall on wheels, and the problem behaviors that we normally associate with school busses have virtually disappeared.

When we start viewing problem behaviors in young people as symptoms of unmet needs, rather than kids being "bad," creative solutions like this present themselves. We can then stay away from punishment and bans and engage them in ways that work for both young people and adults.

You can read about this in the New York Times [HERE](#).



## Court Says 17 Year-olds can Strip ... if it's Art

By Jerry Fest

I have a tremendous amount of respect for Lis Wiehl, a prominent trial lawyer, accomplished author and legal analyst. Therefore, I am willing to consider her opinion that the Iowa Court of Appeals acted appropriately when they recently dismissed the State's request for a review of a lower court decision that the State's public indecency exposure law was not violated when a 17 year-old girl performed in a strip club, due to the fact that there is an exception to the law for "theater performances" and the prosecutors failed to prove that the club wasn't a "theater." Double jeopardy rules were cited as part of the reason for denial of the review.

Never-the-less ... and fully admitting that I am not a lawyer ... I hope I am not the only one who sees absurdity here. We're talking about allowing a 17

year-old girl to perform live adult entertainment. I'm not sure what could be a clearer example of sexual exploitation of a minor by adults than to have a 17 year-old girl seductively strip naked in front of a room full of drinking adults ... and it seems to me that, regardless of the details of a specific law, we should have found a way to take a stand against it. OK, maybe the law is written so that some kind of "art" exemption allows it, but couldn't they have done something else? Charged the patron's with contributing to the delinquency of a minor? Done *something* to take a *stand* and send a *message*?

This story left me with the same feeling that I always get when I see things like the johns of minor-age street kids who are engaging survival sex being charged with *prostitution*, rather than charging them with *child sexual abuse*. It always seems that when it comes to defending our kids, we treat those kids who are in the underbelly of our culture differently, and we're just not as creative as we can be ... or perhaps not as motivated ... to take a stand in their defense.

Maybe it's just me, but something about this just feels wrong.

Read the story [HERE](#).

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### **(NO) SCHOOL LEFT BEHIND**

By Gary Hammons

As President Obama vows to improve our schools via "Race to the Top" and Congress is considering modifications to the Bush (the Second) era "No Child Left Behind" legislation, it seems to me that the proposed changes will make the problem worse. The primary focus of both efforts is improvement in standardized test scores. This is driven by an interest in teacher/school accountability.

Standardized testing, as a measure of teacher/school effectiveness is, at best superficial and at worst a punishment for kids most in need of help. Much like former governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus' solution for improving his state's prison was to have a better class of prisoners, the fastest way to have higher test scores is to get rid of those who test poorly. By rewarding schools and teachers that have higher results, the net result is/will be a worsening of outcomes for lower functioning students and their schools.

The Obama administration would seek to reward states that improve test scores as a part of the "Race to the Top" initiative with five school reform measures. "School Reform" seems to me to imply that there has been willful misbehavior. Even if this were true, the proposed measures would make things worse. Instead, changes in educating our children should embrace the entire spectrum of healthy, productive living, rather than merely intensifying particular subjects, or instituting merit pay.

Our schools have changed little in the last hundred years while kids have access to immeasurably more information and learning opportunities via technology than in the past. The terms "digital immigrant" (adult) and "digital native" (child) convey this very well. While the cost per student for traditional education has continued to grow, the outcomes have been unimpressive. With dropout rates at alarming levels and many high achieving students reporting little value from their education, it is clear that changes are needed. Most important, we need to recognize that there is much more to learning than seat time in subject areas presented in isolation. Moreover, traditional teacher training focused on subject skills rather than learning theory and integration/practice is like hiring a very knowledgeable mechanic to fix your car, but limiting his/her diagnostic techniques to what was used on your parent's car.

**I am convinced that the following changes would solve many of the concerns for our schools:**

**Bigger is not better.** Make schools smaller. 300 kids in a separate campus (NOT a “school within a school”), would cause all staff and students to get to know each other on a more personal basis. Gang issues, in large part, would simply go away. Parents, kids, and staff would readily know who the best and worst teachers and administrators are such that merit and corrective actions could be implemented. The need for regimentation and focus on “seat time” would diminish. Costs per student would actual be reduced since there would be far less organizational overhead (security). Bring needed social services to the school and classroom and make the entire school a learning community. However, to make this happen school configurations will need to move away from subject area emphasis and toward a focus on each individual with their assets rather than deficits.

**Make after school programming universal.** After school programs that are enriching, interesting and fun would, ironically, solve many of the problems facing regular school. Mentoring rather than tutoring, lifetime sports (fishing, golf, skiing, sailing) rather than team sports, and community engagement, all connected with and coordinated with the schools would reduce dropout rates, would provide the diversity and would return the schools to a more favorable roll in the community.

**Develop merit pay measures based on post graduation feedback.** Survey students and parents two years after graduation/exit and every year for five years following as to their most effective and least effective teachers and administrators. Provide merit or bonus pay or other acknowledgements for those at the top and corrective measures or career redirection for those at the bottom. Also, provide bonuses to schools that improve dropout rates and reduce standardized testing to a minimum. The latter results in standardized kids with lots of fall out while causing extensive psychological damage for those at the bottom (while also boring the hell out of those who excel).

It has taken a century or more for schools to become what they are, and there are no simple or quick fixes. By promoting the above and not letting school districts consolidate to bigger facilities or expel so many kids, the benefits to society will be great in both monitory and productivity measures. With schools reorganized as learning communities and providing coordinated social services, we will all be better able to address the future in more effective ways.