

## POINTS OF VIEW

## New teaching methods are progressive

By MARK MOKRIS  
QUEST COLUMNIST

**R**ecently, some visitors to our home were glancing at our two children's creative work taped on our refrigerator door. I think one of our friends felt embarrassed for us as she read my daughter's transcription of the Pledge of Allegiance.

It was full of "misspellings." I place these words in quotations, because in my daughter's first-grade class at Highmeadow Common Campus, there is no such thing as misspellings.

My daughter created this paper, writing down the Pledge of Allegiance, during the middle of first grade after barely turning 7 years old.

In the early years, in the Farmington Schools, they used a wonderful technique called "inventive" or "temporary" spelling, and because of it, I am convinced that she and my 11-year-old son have mastered the ability to express themselves on paper much better

than I had when I was their age.

They start in kindergarten teaching the children how to sound out each letter, and throughout the process, encourage them to write stories and letters, and to express themselves in all sorts of different ways through writing.

You are right if you think that a kindergarten child can barely spell. However, they don't let that hold them back. Rather, they are taught to sound out each word and invent the spelling. That is, they spell their words the best they can based on the letter sounds they have learned.

This continues in first grade. However, they get a bit more serious. They learn more of the phonics and are told that this is a temporary technique they are using. Each word indeed has a definite spelling. But, for the time being, just write. Put your imagination, your ideas, your feelings down on paper.

On her own, my daughter got the notion that she wanted to write down the

## QUEST COLUMN

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Pledge of Allegiance. She spelled allegiance as "alegens," republic as "re-pobles," indivisible as "indidgwill."

She doesn't know what those words mean anyway. She has just been reciting them each morning at the start of class. Interestingly however, her initiative in producing this small paper prompted a family discussion about

those words, what they mean, and how they are spelled properly.

And that is why inventive spelling is a great technique. It gets the kids writing and expressing themselves very early. This leads to insightfulness at their young ages that I would not have expected. I have seen much evidence of this in my children.

Once they reach second grade inventive spelling goes away. The kids are drilled repeatedly. They bring home lists of words they must know, and the parents continue to drill them. My son is such a good speller that I frequently find myself asking him to double-check me.

The Farmington Public Schools have taken a real beating lately in this newspaper. We all feel the money we give our public schools is so high. We are all screaming for better return on our investment, better results, better MEAP scores.

Yet when the schools employ innova-

tive techniques, like inventive spelling, so many parents quickly say, "That's bad. The best way to learn is the way I learned."

The world is so different than it was 35 years ago. Shouldn't we expect that educators might have better ways to teach than they did in 1960?

Apparently, inventive spelling is a technique which is part of the educational process called "whole learning" used in our schools. Whole learning has been criticized greatly, with the solution being "a return to basics." I am baffled as to why.

I don't know what kind of programs they have at Our Lady of Sorrows, St. Fabian, or Southfield Christian. I can't imagine how they can provide a better education than my children have received so far in the Farmington Public Schools.

Mark Mokris lives in Farmington Hills and his two children attend Farmington Public Schools.

## Public health efforts need a shot in the arm

**W**hen I was a little boy, my mother wouldn't let me go in the swimming pool from time to time during the summer. "There's a polio outbreak," she'd explain. And she'd show me a picture from the local paper with a sad looking, paralyzed child trapped in an iron lung.

I remember the day long ago when the doctor told me to chew the sugar cube with the pink liquid on it. And I recall how proud and grateful I felt earlier this summer when I attended the ceremony at the University of Michigan honoring Dr. Salk and the successful field trials for his vaccine against poliomyelitis.

So it was with feelings of shock and dismay that I heard the news that Michigan ranks last — dead last — among all the states in the percentage of preschool kids who are immunized against preventable childhood diseases.

According to the study just released by the U.S. Center for Disease Control, Michigan's 61 percent immunization rate for 2-year-olds is dwarfed by the national average of 75 percent. (High-

est score was Vermont at 88 percent, followed by Hawaii and Connecticut at 86 percent.)

Not surprisingly, the biggest problem in Michigan is in Detroit, where only 50 percent of preschoolers have received their immunizations. This number is up substantially, however, from the measly 29 percent immunized according to the 1990 study, according to Cynthia Tauog, chief health officer for the city.

So how come so many parents ignore their overwhelming responsibilities to their own kids? The public health experts I talked to at U-M offered a variety of explanations:

■ It takes no less than five visits to the clinic to have immunized properly a 2-year-old against measles, rubella, mumps, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, polio and hepatitis B. That's a hassle for any family, especially if both parents are working and don't have much of any health insurance.

■ A lot of parents put off immunizing their children, and they don't learn about the state law requiring immunization until their kid goes to school on



PHILIP POWER

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the first day of kindergarten. Not surprisingly, the immunization percentage increases dramatically after age 5.

■ There is a kind of Catch-22 at work here. Through past efforts at immunization, we have dramatically reduced — in some instances virtually eliminated — childhood diseases. An entire generation of protected parents has no idea how lethal these diseases can be and, hence, little recognition of how important it is to immunize their children.

Be this as it may, it's still hard for me to tolerate the idea that two out of five Michigan parents are so irresponsible — so lacking in family values — as to leave their preschool children unprotected against terrible disease.

There's a wider dimension to this issue as well. Immunization is one of those cases in which the welfare of society as a whole depends heavily on the willingness of individual members to act responsibly.

It's an idea in public health called "herd immunity." Essentially, it means that if a high enough percentage

of the entire herd is immunized against a disease, that sickness cannot be transmitted through the total population. But if the herd immunity drops below a certain number, disease transmission increases dramatically.

The level of herd immunity required to protect society as a whole against measles, for instance, is nearly 90 percent. That's much higher than existing levels in many places in Michigan, which is why you keep hearing about periodic outbreaks of measles, especially in inner cities.

The herd immunity level required to interdict the transmission of polio, however, is much lower.

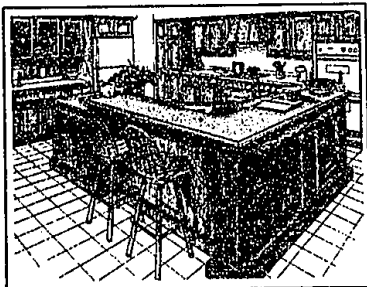
What a sad irony it would be if continued irresponsibility of individual parents would reduce Michigan's herd immunity level for polio to the point, that I, in my turn, had to keep my son away from swimming pools in the summer, just the way my mother did for me.

Philip Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 Ext. 1680.

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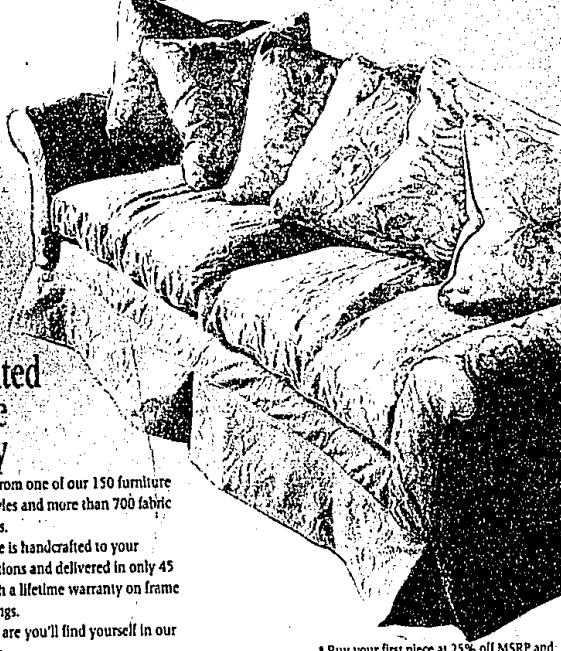
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