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JAY MATHEWS

Arlington's Smith Has a Track Record Obama Would Prize

here is a lot of talk about who the next U.S. secretary of education will be. All I know is it won't be **Rob** Smith.

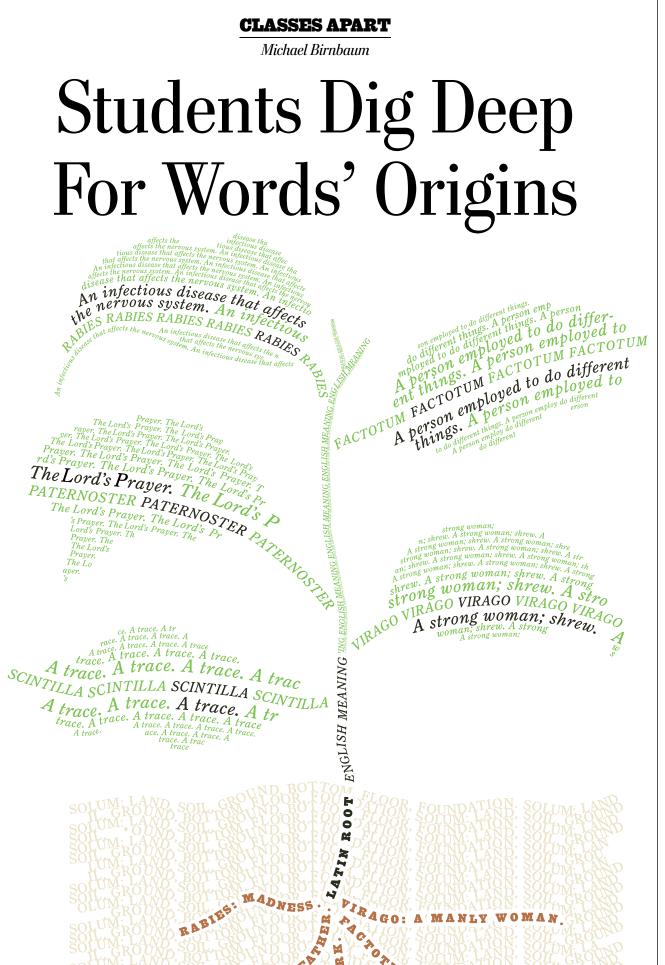
That's Robert G. Smith, 65, the Arlington County school superintendent due to retire in June. The name fits the person. He is quiet, humble, bookish and — if you compare him with other Washington area superintendents I know — almost anonymous. He is not the kind of person a secretary of education has to be: out there selling the department's story. He has other things on his mind.

I have admired several U.S. education secretaries — Bill Bennett, Dick Riley, Rod Paige and the current jobholder, Margaret Spellings. I think they would all make splendid school superintendents. Paige was one before he came to Washington. The candidates for next education secretary also look good to me. I would bet on Arne Duncan, leader of the Chicago public schools. Other possibilities like former South Carolina state superintendent Inez Tenenbaum and New York City Chancellor Joel Klein are also good. But their track records don't come close to Smith's.

He grew up in Silver Spring, was a teacher and an administrator in Frederick County and an assistant superintendent in the Spring district of Houston before applying for the Arlington job in 1997. School board member **Libby Garvey** has never forgotten his answer to a standard question: Why do you want to come to Arlington? "He said that many people in education around the nation thought that you could usually predict how a child would do in school if you knew that child's racial and ethnic background," Garvey recalled. "He said he wanted to come to Arlington and prove them wrong."

The county was moving rapidly to where it is now. Less than half of its students are non-Hispanic whites. A third are from families poor enough to qualify for federal lunch subsidies. Many superintendents use that as an excuse for poor academic performance. Smith did the opposite, becoming one of the first district leaders in the country to make closing the achievement gap between white and minority students a public goal.

I was the Washington Post reporter covering Arlington schools when he announced the plan. I analyzed the move in a typically cynical journalist's way. I thought he was taking a big risk. Closing those gaps would be hard. If the numbers didn't go his way, people like me would put it in the paper, and he would look bad. The emphasis on poor minority children was a potential sore point with affluent white parents who



Va. Math Standards' Bar Might Be Raised

By MICHAEL BIRNBAUM Washington Post Staff Writer

Kindergartners would be expected to be able to count to 100, not just to 30. Perimeter and area would be introduced and explored in third grade, instead of in second grade.

Those are among many proposed revisions to Virginia's math standards that are part of a national movement to strengthen and streamline math education to prepare all students to learn algebra and higher concepts.

The standards prescribe in detail concepts students are expected to learn in each grade, and the state verifies whether those expectations are met each year through the Standards of Learning tests. Now the standards are being revised for the second time since their introduction in 1995.

Hearings will be held in Virginia next month, including one at 7 p.m. Dec. 3 at Robinson Secondary School, 5035 Sideburn Rd., Fairfax. A draft is on the state Department of Education Web site at *www.doe.virginia.gov*. Final revisions are expected to be adopted by the end of next year.

Some teachers have criticized current standards for repeating concepts over multiple grades and have said that a more focused approach could reduce the need for review as years go by. The state Board of Education is trying to respond to those criticisms with the proposed revisions.

"I feel like we're getting a little more into the heart of the material," said Carolyn Williamson, a math teacher at Lee-Davis High School in Mechanicsville and president of the Virginia Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which has encouraged its members to submit comments to the Education Department. "It makes sense that students should have some fluency and mastery with one set of topics before you move on to the next," she said.

The changes range from the small, such as making kindergartners learn one through 100, to the broad, trying to better prepare grade-school students for algebra.

Some teachers applaud the proposal. "I do think they're trying to streamline it. and I see a greater emphasis on problem-solving, which is a good thing," said Elizabeth Korte, head of the math department at Stone Bridge High Sch d in Ashburn. She sai also thought that the new standards would make it easier to teach topics in depth. Korte said the standards were helpful in establishing a "baseline" and should be treated as a minimum for classes, not a limit. Inevitably, she said they will have imperfections. An example: "Some of our college kids came back this year saying they wish they had spent more time on conic sections," Korte said. But that topic is eliminated from the new Algebra II standards. "It's hard to fit it all in," she said.

worried their kids might be ignored.

Guess who turned out to be right? I hadn't checked Arlington's numbers in several years. Smith, of course, never called to brag about them. Last week, I asked county schools spokeswoman **Linda Erdos** to send me the data. I was vaguely aware that Smith had made some progress, but I was not prepared for the size of the gains.

From 1998 to this year, the percentage of Arlington students passing the Virginia Standards of Learning exams rose from 65 to 90 percent. The progress by minorities was even greater: Black students went from 37 percent to 74 percent and Hispanic students from 47 percent to 82 percent. All groups improved. Whites went from 82 percent to 96 percent, Asians from 69 percent to 95 percent.

On the gaps, Smith made me look like an idiot. The distance between non-Hispanic white and black passing rates was cut in half, from 45 to 22 percentage points. Between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites, the gap shrank from to 35 to 14 percentage points.

Smith would say more has to be done and this was not his doing, but the result of hard work by teachers, students, parents and the county's very good school board. But he can't deny what he did to encourage such an effort. He co-founded the Minority Student Achievement Network, a group of districts across the country that share information on how to close the gaps. There was one full-day and 17 half-day pre-kindergarten programs when Smith arrived; now there are 44 full-day programs. By last year, 89 Arlington teachers had earned certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, one of the largest totals in Virginia. They were encouraged by Smith's insistence that the county pay for the expensive review process

The county's four high schools are among the nation's most innovative in encouraging challenging courses. Arlington went from 962 college-level Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams in 1997 to 3.626 this year, a 277 percent increase. Smith took the unconventional move of making **Doris Jackson**, a former guidance counselor, principal of his lowest-performing high school, Wakefield. She introduced summer prep programs and achievementoriented clubs for students from non-college families and continued her predecessor's effort to open AP to all. AP participation increased, with scores still strong, winning the school a rare national award.

For the next few months, Smith will be getting warm praise and nice dinners as he prepares to leave. But he appears to be in good health and still has many promising ideas. I wonder if I might be wrong, again. Give him a good publicity team and he could be a great education secretary.

Dear President-elect Obama: Please check this guy out.

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First in a series of occasional short takes on unusual courses in local schools.

or a few hours every other afternoon, Latin and Greek roots rain on Phil Rosenthal's etymology class at Park View High School in Sterling. Etymology — the study of the origin and evolution of words — might be considered the domain of tweedy types who reek of pipe smoke. But Rosenthal tries to give his 20-some students a sense of the stories and shades behind the words they use every day.

"Kids see a word that to them is foreign, and they run away from it," Rosenthal says. He started the class with a group of other Loudoun County teachers in 1990, and it remains one of the few of its kind in the country.

On a day focused on Latin words including arena and sinister, Rosenthal talked about the twists words take as they make their way into English.

Arena, for example, means "a sandy place" in Latin. Sand was scattered in the center of Roman stadiums where gladiators fought. Sinister derives from Latin for "left," with the implication that lefties were suspicious.

Rosenthal said some students take the semester-long elective because they are curious about words. Some liked other classes he taught. Others might want to improve their verbal scores on standardized tests. And a few "are actually lost," he said. "They wanted to study bugs and thought it would be a cool thing to take an entomology class."

(That was a mistake shared by a Loudoun school official when a reporter made an inquiry.)

An understanding of the complexity of language might give a leg up to students entering college.

Students in Dennis Baron's English classes at the University of Illinois "tend to know almost nothing" about word origins. "They don't see roots and those sorts of things," said Baron, a professor of English and linguistics.

Although he wondered whether etymology might be better as a component of a larger high school class on linguistics, Baron said he thought it was "a way of getting at high school English without the overemphasis on formal grammatical stuff" in many secondary curriculums.

That seems to be borne out in the class. This week, students are starting a unit on the influence of mythology on the language. They'll give presentations about Sisyphus and Narcissus, who lend their names to "Sisyphean" and "narcissistic."

Etymology "just brings all this general knowledge together," Rosenthal said.

Tell us about an unusual course at your school. E-mail the Schools & Learning page at andersonn@washpost.com. Please provide name and telephone number.

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Spellings Touts Support Effort At Fairfax High

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings visited Fairfax High School last week to spotlight a program she deemed promising for preventing dropouts and getting more students into college.

"College has gone from a nice-tohave to a must-have," Spellings told a group of Fairfax students and educators Wednesday. Setting higher expectations and offering more rigorous classes for all students are promising strategies for helping more students succeed, she said.

The Fairfax High program, known as AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, is offered at 4,000 schools across the country and abroad. It provides extra support and study skills classes — which teach note-taking, reviewing, time management and other topics — for students with average academic histories and expects them to make above-average strides with a challenging course load.

Many participants are African American, Hispanic or the first in their families to be college-bound. The program has a strong success record. At Fairfax High, nearly all of the 81 students involved have passed state exams, and all seniors in the program will have taken at least four Advanced Placement classes by the time they graduate, officials said.

Administrators who met with Spellings talked about "AVID"-izing the whole school, training other teachers to set high expectations and challenging more students academically. The countywide budget for AVID this year is about \$747,000, an amount that could be cut because of fiscal troubles.

— Michael Alison Chandler

