Competency, not self-esteem, happiness, should be goal of education

By Tom Purcell, Posted: 01/06/2009

My second-grade teacher would be at once shocked and proud. Maybe I better explain.

According to Britain's Daily Mail, yet another trend is under way in which we're turning our kids into a bunch of softies. Many schools within the UK have barred teachers from marking student papers in red. This trend has also been documented in Australia and the United States.

As it goes, correcting pupils with red ink is considered too confrontational and unpleasant for the children. Many teachers prefer to grade in more soothing colors, such as green, blue, pink and yellow. Red ink surely wasn't banned at St. Germaine Catholic School in the 1960s and '70s.

That school was all business, and the wonderful sisters who taught there were too busy ramming knowledge and values into us to worry about our sensitive little egos. It is true that the sisters were more favorable toward the better students. Who could blame them. We had 40 kids or more packed into each class. The sisters, many of whom entered the convent during the Depression years and were getting on in years by the 1970s, were exhausted. They had little patience with underachieving runts such as me.

Whereas the better students, usually girls, were always attentive and eager, I was always off daydreaming in another world. I couldn't wait until recess. I couldn't wait until we played keep-away, as I was good at that. I returned to class sweaty and rumpled and resumed daydreaming through the rest of the afternoon. I was a continual disappointment to my second-grade teacher (we called her Sister Mary Brass Knuckles) and, boy, did she let me have it. When she called me out of my daydreaming world to approach the chalkboard and complete an equation, I was lost in left field without a glove. Sister never let me off easy. She never let anybody off easy, because she saw it as her duty to ram math, science and grammar into our noggins.

She didn't worry about our self-esteem or how good we felt. She knew the only way to attain self-esteem — the only way to function as an adult — was to be accurate and correct. She marked up my English compositions as though she were getting paid to use red ink. Nobody knew it then, but she was way ahead of her time.

A recent study by the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution found that **"a nation's level of student 'happiness' and 'confidence' is negatively correlated to student achievement when compared to other nations."**

The study concluded the following: "That America's infatuation with the 'happiness factor' in education may be misplaced, and could, in fact, be hurting, not helping, American students when it comes to maintaining an international competitive edge." In other words, America has some of the most smug and self-assured — and least accomplished — students on the face of the Earth.

Since they were babies, caring adults and educators assured them they are intelligent, attractive and wonderful — even though nobody asked them to break a sweat earning their wonderfulness.

So it turns out the proponents of the anti-red-ink movement have it wrong. The good sisters at St. Germaine had it right. All those red marks on my second-grade composition papers were unpleasant at the time, but they did me good in the long run. Sister would be at once shocked and proud to learn that this daydreaming pupil eventually woke up and went on to write a nationally syndicated newspaper column.