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Hubbard Texts Used by Some Teachers

■ **Schools:** A few LAUSD educators say they have been applying the Scientology founder's methods in their classrooms for years.

By DUKE HELFAND
TIMES STAFF WRITER

As the Los Angeles Board of Education grapples with whether to approve a new charter school that would feature the teaching methods of L. Ron Hubbard, the late founder of the Church of Scientology, a handful of district teachers say they have been using the techniques for years and keep copies of Hubbard's works in their classrooms.

The controversy over the use of Hubbard's methods—known as Applied Scholastics—has prompted district officials to undertake a review of policies on religion in public schools and to seek an opinion from the state Department of Education on the legality of using the materials.

The school board, meanwhile, plans to meet in closed session Monday to get advice from district lawyers on its obligation to keep religion out of classrooms.

SPECIAL REPORT

The LAUSD special-education teacher who wants to lead the proposed school in the east San Fernando Valley, Linda Smith, maintains that the Hubbard materials are nonsectarian learning techniques appropriate for students of any faith. But board members, citing Smith's acknowledged membership in the Church of Scientology, said they are concerned about religious links.

"I think we need to get more information on what this educational philosophy is [so that] we feel comfortable that it doesn't have religious overtones," said board President Julie Korenstein, who has asked district staff to review Applied Scholastics.

As a charter school, Smith's campus would be allowed to operate outside many

state and district rules that constrain curriculum and budgets. Her proposed use of Hubbard texts has drawn attention because of Scientology's legal status as a religion and the fact that it has been variously criticized as a cult and a profit-driven enterprise since Hubbard started it in the early 1950s.

Under district policy, any religion, including traditions and observances, may be taught as an academic subject, but instructors are prohibited from advocating a particular set of religious beliefs. The guidelines, issued in December 1995, call religion a significant historical force that enables students to "understand the complex dynamics at work in human society."

One 1st Amendment specialist said that schools can comply with the rules by using "state-approved" textbooks, which are carefully scrutinized by educators before being released to public school districts across California.

"If you can bring in your own materials, then the whole effort of trying to come up with textbooks that are appropriate for use within the public school system is sub-

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VALLEY NEWS

SCHOOL: Teachers Defend Hubbard Texts as Educational Tools

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verted," said Doug Mirell, a board member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

But teachers who use Applied Scholastics—the cornerstone of Hubbard's Study Technology—call the works effective classroom tools based exclusively on Hubbard's educational ideas, not his religious principles. Smith, who wants to direct a charter school for about 100 students in the East San Fernando Valley, said in interviews last week that she has been using the Hubbard materials in her current job at Esperanza Elementary School in downtown Los Angeles with great success.

Later in the week, two more LAUSD teachers who describe themselves as Scientologists, Don Woods of Jefferson High School in South L.A. and Vicki Gordon of Luther Burbank Middle School in Highland Park, said they, too, have been using Applied Scholastics in their classrooms. Woods and Gordon met with The Times on Friday at Applied Scholastics' central office in Hollywood, just down the street from the Church of Scientology's headquarters.

All three teachers said the Study Technology kindles young minds by addressing three fundamental barriers to learning.

The first is known as "lack of mass"—when there is no object to illustrate a concept. Students over-

come the problem by relating ideas to real life.

The second barrier is the "skipped gradient"—those steps in a learning process that students don't understand. Students conquer difficult material by studying it incrementally.

The third, and most important, barrier is the "misunderstood word." As the Hubbard reasoning goes, students cannot learn what they do not understand, so they use dictionaries to look up unfamiliar words in a process called "word clearing."

Fatigue, misbehavior and frustration are among the "manifestations" symptomatic of students who have come up against those barriers and struggled to learn their lessons, according to the philosophy.

Gordon said she has found the Hubbard ideas so illuminating that she now uses them as the primary tool in her classroom. She said she keeps six copies of "Learning How to Learn" in her classroom—some she has bought, others have been donated:

Gordon also said she ran a seminar two years ago to introduce Luther Burbank colleagues to Hubbard's three barriers to learning.

"This technology empowers students," said Gordon, 42. "It creates literacy."

Gordon said she has been a

Scientologist for 10 years but insists that her religion has no bearing on her professional life.

"I don't feel like I have anything to hide," said Gordon, who teaches sixth, seventh and eighth grades. "I feel like I've come across something that helps people."

Gordon's principal could not be reached for comment. But Gordon's students offered glowing praise for the Hubbard methods in thank-you letters they wrote to their teacher at the end of the school year, letters Gordon produced for The Times.

One, dated May 28, 1997, mirrors the very language contained in the Applied Scholastics texts and even refers to one of the books by name.

"What I learned from the 'Learning How to Learn' book is that now I know what to do when I have . . . lack of mass or even have a skipped gradient," the student wrote. "I know how to handle it. It has made me feel very good about myself because if I had not done this book I would not have gotten this far on my learning."

Gordon and other teachers say the value of Hubbard's methods has gotten lost amid the uproar over Hubbard himself.

One of the most ardent Hubbard proponents is Smith, a Santa Clarita resident who wants to open her own K-8 school in the Sunland-

Tujunga area. Northwest, if approved, would join 15 other charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified system.

Northwest's curriculum would include standard texts as well as the Hubbard books, if they are approved by a curriculum committee of parents, teachers and administrators, she said. Smith's proposal, which made no mention of the Hubbard materials when it was unveiled before the school board last week, is scheduled for its next hearing Aug. 20.

Esperanza Principal Rowena Lagrosa, who praised Smith's teaching in a recent recommendation letter, said she was unaware that Smith was using the Hubbard techniques. She called Smith's methods "pedagogically sound," adding that Smith has been using "effective strategies that any other teacher would employ."

But Lagrosa said she turned down a request about two years ago by Smith to buy Hubbard books for her class "because they were written by L. Ron Hubbard. To my knowledge, he represents a

religion."

And Lagrosa reprimanded Smith during the same period for writing a letter on school district stationery seeking advice on the legality of purchasing Hubbard materials for her students.

Woods, an English teacher at Jefferson High, shares Smith's enthusiasm.

Woods introduced a peer tutoring program at Jefferson in 1995 that emphasized the word-clearing strategy. The tutoring effort was abandoned after one semester partly because Woods was needed to teach another class. But the effort is described in a 1½-page summary on the Applied Scholastics Internet Web site.

Woods has continued to use the word-clearing method in his English classes. Before his students read Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" or Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea," they scan the texts, pick out words they don't understand, jot them down and define them. Then they read the works with their own mini-dictionaries on hand.

"Word clearing is the champ," said Woods, 49. "I want to help students get unstuck, to have them realize they can learn."

Woods said he keeps a copy of the Hubbard text "Study Skills for Life" on his classroom desk and says that students are welcome to review it.

Woods' boss, Principal Virginia Preciado, said she was unaware of the Hubbard materials in his classroom and she would like to review them. But she expressed confidence in Woods, who has been at Jefferson for five years.

"I don't feel he is teaching anything religious or something that would be inappropriate," Preciado said. "As a classroom teacher, he is very concerned about the students getting the basic skills they need to move forward."

Woods would like the Hubbard Study Technology expanded beyond his classroom.

"I personally would like to see word clearing used prominently in the district at all levels," he said. "It's a procedure that can be used by anyone for lifelong learning."

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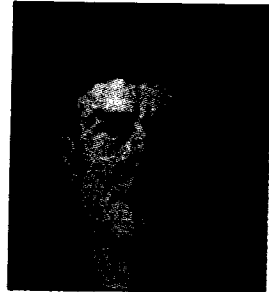
Charter School Fiasco May Have Been Averted by a Rumor

This was the week, among other things, when Los Angeles dabbled with the notion of pouring tax dollars into a school that planned to catechize its students with Scientology-inspired texts. It was like watching a train wreck about to happen.

At week's end, the debacle may have been avoided. The Board of Education caught on to the gambit and some of those involved now predict that the board's vote, expected sometime in the next 30 days, could be negative in the extreme.

But the point is this: The application for Northwest Charter School almost cruised past the board without anyone knowing about the Scientology connection. More amazing yet, school officials say the sponsors broke no rules when they failed to disclose it.

Thus the story of Northwest really



ROBERT A. JONES

amounts to something more than a possible gambit by the Scientologists. It's a cautionary tale about the waves of reform washing over the education system and how that reform can easily

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JONES: A Cautionary Tale on Reform

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get converted into something truly, horribly embarrassing.

In case you missed the news accounts, here's the Cliffs Notes version of the Northwest affair:

In June, public school teacher Linda Smith submitted an otherwise innocuous proposal for a charter school in the East San Fernando Valley. A "charter" school is something new; it can operate with virtual independence of school board rules while continuing to receive public money.

Smith's application tends toward the standard buzz phrases. Under its Statement of Philosophy, the application intones: "Instruction is based upon continual assessment and evaluation, goal setting, and specialized forms of instruction leading to performance based assessed skills acquired, accomplished or mastered."

You get the picture. For 62 pages it goes on and on, revealing almost nothing about the true nature of the school. Nonetheless, the application effectively jumps through all the legal hoops required by the school district.

For example, the district demands that the applicant explain "what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century

and how learning best occurs." It also demands to know how the school will measure "pupil outcomes."

But nowhere does the district ask the applicants, in effect, who they are. Might they be a church? Might they believe in hourly headstanding to facilitate a nourishing rush of blood to the brain? How about high colonics or exercise in the buff?

Not having asked, the district didn't know. So the Northwest application wound through the bureaucracy and, last week, landed on the board calendar. A copy of it sat in front of each board member in all its opaque splendor.

And just maybe it could have rolled toward approval. Except that a few rumors had started to float around.

Board member David Tokofsky, for one, had heard the rumors. When Linda Smith came to the hearing table, he began to probe delicately, hoping she would volunteer the information. She didn't.

Amy Pyle and Duke Helfand, two reporters at The Times, had also heard the rumors. They watched while Tokofsky failed to get Smith to spill.

In frustration, Tokofsky wandered back to the press table and started speaking his doubts to the assembled reporters. Then he blurted out, "Do you think

she's a Scientologist?"

The effect was like throwing a match on gasoline. Within a few hours, to extend the metaphor, the application for Northwest School was toast—or well on its way to it. Smith admitted that she has been a Scientologist for 16 years and, more important, she planned to use school texts inspired by Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard.

In explaining this, Smith tried out an interesting distinction. Scientology, she said, is the religion founded by Hubbard. But the teaching philosophy founded by Hubbard is a technology. Not a religion at all. So it's OK.

It's not OK, of course. And now that all the layers have been peeled back, Northwest School may never open its doors.

We were saved, but not by the system designed to save us. All the bureaucrats and all the forms and questions failed. They produced 62 pages of gobbledygook about "goal setting" and "assessed skills acquired, accomplished and mastered."

What saved us was the serendipity of rumor. Someone knew of Smith's affiliation, and they whispered it to someone else who picked up the phone and passed it along.

A slender thread by which to hang the integrity of school reform. But right now, it's all we've got.