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Schools test out higher learning

Private and public schools using Transcendental Meditation report high standardized test scores

BY PATRICK CONDON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FAIRFIELD, Iowa — Here in the American headquarters of Transcendental Meditation, people like to brag that, much as in Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon, "all the children are above average."

"The children are so enthusiastic to do things: competitions, academics, and so on," said Ashley Deans, headmaster of Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment, a private K-12 academy with about 300 students. "And when they enter it, they win it ... time and time again."

The secret, school officials say, is Transcendental Meditation — the practice of invoking a state of deep relaxation by mentally repeating a word, or mantra.

Advocates say TM can spread success at other schools, and groups promoting it recently have appeared at public schools in New York, California, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and other places.

But critics, and there are plenty, say Transcendental Meditation in public schools straddles the line between church and state, and that other forms of meditation would be just as effective for students.

"I would call it a stealth religion," said Barry Markovsky, a University of South Carolina sociologist who researches social networks. "I would ask whether this is a group I would

want to have teaching my children stress-reduction techniques."

Transcendental Meditation is a trademark technique brought to the United States by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a Hindu monk who became guru to The Beatles, Mia Farrow and other celebrities in the 1960s. In the '70s, he bought the bankrupt Parsons College in this southeastern Iowa city of about 10,000 and established Maharishi University of Management.

Followers recently formed the Consciousness-Based Education Association to provide "scientifically validated educational programs, technologies, and consulting service for new schools, existing schools and after-school organizations," according to the group's Web site.

"You have 10 million kids on antidepressants, one in five black kids with hypertension, America not leading the world in test scores," said Bob Roth, spokesman for the Consciousness-Based Education Association. "Transcendental Meditation is not just a way to reduce stress, it's a way to prepare a student to learn."

Roth said his group is not actively approaching schools, but rather providing information when asked.

"A school day can get pretty stressful," Maharishi School sophomore Cooper Rose said during a break from math class. "Being able to meditate every day gives you a chance to settle, and to get a nice basis for the day on your mind."

Security: Mail-ins also under watch

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that there is not much potential for ballot fraud.

"The drop box in my county — Polk County — looks a lot like an old mailbox and it's picked up a couple times every day," Corbin said. "If someone was trying to jimmy the lock on that drop box, someone would notice. I'm a believer in the system, and I personally love voting on the couch."

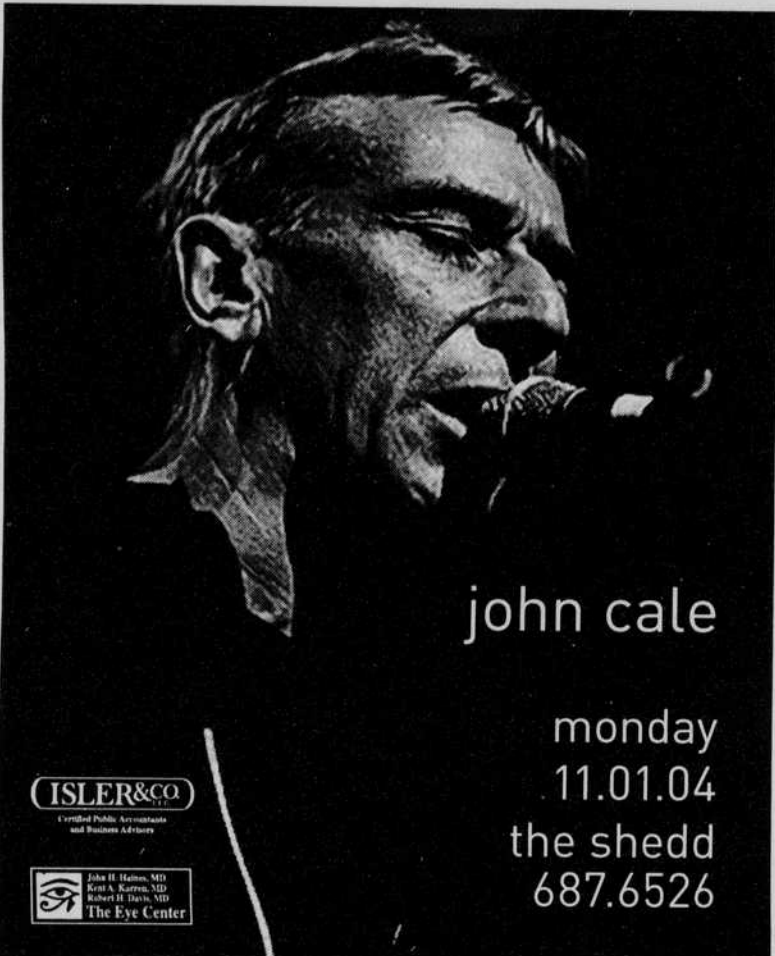
But Oregon election officials don't discuss security beyond that for confidentiality purposes. Newingham said the extent of security does not cover constant surveillance or at least a drop-box official who can guard against potential fraud.

"We can't post people outside for these drop sites because many of them are available 24 hours a day," Newingham said. "We've used these drop sites since the mid-'90s and people have liked the availability and location of these sites, and it's gone without much of a hitch."

Yet concerns do not end with drop boxes. The mail-in ballot system in the state may offer fraudulent voters the potential to create false or even multiple addresses in order to receive extra ballots, but Newingham says that possibility is rare at best.

"We use the 911-emergency database to verify our addresses," she said. "We catch some fraudulent addresses, but that's the nature of the beast, and we remove those addresses."

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