

letters

Astronomy in local papers

For some time now, scientists have been distraught at the growth of astrology-related materials in newspapers in the US. Unfortunately, there has not been any corresponding increase in the amount of clear, reliable science reporting available to most newspaper readers. Recently, however, a new series of astronomy and physics articles written by scientists, which has been running successfully in San Francisco area papers, has become available for general distribution in the US and Canada.

Called *Exploring the Universe*, the weekly series is not a routine observing guide to the naked-eye sky (as can sometimes be found buried among weather reports in many papers); rather the columns deal with current concepts and discoveries in astronomy and related fields.

Each article is about 500 words long and presents a single idea without the use of jargon or mathematics. However, each column is written either by a research astronomer or science educator and is carefully edited, not just for readable style, but also for scientific accuracy. A sampling of titles will give you an idea of the flavor of the series: "The Search for Black Holes," "Volcanoes on Other Worlds," "Searching for Antimatter by Balloon," "Cloudshine and Moonshine" (on the discovery of molecular alcohol in interstellar clouds), "Time Slows Down in SS 433," "The Largest Object in the Universe," and "What Were the Atoms in Your Body Doing 8 Billion Years Ago?"

The project carries the endorsement of the Task Group on Education in Astronomy of the American Astronomical Society and is sponsored by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific.

At the present time the series is featured in about 15 newspapers across the US and Canada. We would very much like to solicit the assistance of interested PHYSICS TODAY readers in placing the series in other newspapers.

In general, editors are most likely to pay attention if they receive a letter from someone in the local community. We will be happy to send anyone who is willing to write, an information packet (which includes sample columns) to send to the editor. Please include the

name of your local paper in your letter to us.

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More high-school teaching

I wish to fuel the debate which has been running in the letters column about teaching high-school physics (May, page 89). I rush to agree with Roger Burkhart, contrary to Robert Feldman's very definite opinions; the public-school teacher is confronted with violence. The university life does not prepare one for the verbal and physical assault found as a way of life in today's schools. Feldman was quick to point out that experience allows a teacher to reduce preparation time—too quick!

An experienced teacher has his plans and demonstrations well prepared. They have been done before. Numerous times. But a good teacher uses this luxury to improve on the good and remove the bad and the time-worn. And apparently unknown to the author, there is the matter that the fundamental skills of today's youth have increasingly worsened. Today it takes more time to read a simple lab report than it takes to prep a full lab. College-trained instructors would not have the slightest idea about the teaching of reading and writing, which is now a necessary skill for teachers of the gifted student.

The college instructor is surely involved in teaching full-time with little research. But they never been trained in the art of teaching. Some, nevertheless, become very good and some are appalling.

I quote "The majority of better school systems are willing to pay..." At this I cannot stop laughing. The majority of school systems are offering what is termed "earned retirement incentive credit." Given to a teacher near retirement (with experience and degrees), it is simply a \$10 000 bonus to leave! Economy-minded schools can say goodbye to a person earning \$20 000 and



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