

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, a mix of clouds and sunshine, high 75. Tonight, mostly cloudy, a little rain late, low 62. Tomorrow, a thunderstorm around, high 82. Weather map, Page B8.

VOL. CLXIV . . . No. 56,867

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NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2015

\$2.50

humor took up residence in the corridors of St. Peter's Square, and has never left.

Shortly thereafter, a longtime acquaintance told Francis he hardly recognized the Jesuit known as Jorge Mario Bergoglio. What happened? The pope said that he was, indeed, a changed man, as John L. Allen recounts in his new book, "The Francis Miracle." The pope said he was filled with "interior freedom and peace, and that sense has never left me."

The surprise phone calls continue. He's pope, he can call anyone he wants. Putin on Line 1. Obama on Line 2. Jay Z on hold. But a few weeks ago, he dialed up an Italian man, Franco Rabuffi, who was suffering from an illness. Rabuffi didn't believe it was the pope and hung up. The pope called a second time, and again Rabuffi hung up. On the third time, they connected.

"I was speechless," Rabuffi told the Vatican newspaper, "but Francis came to my rescue, saying what happened was funny."

In March, the pope visited Naples, a wonderful city, its ancient warrens torn apart by mafia corruption and poverty. He challenged the violent Camorra, calling for an end to "the tears of the mothers of Naples." In words that only a former bouncer could use, Papa Francesco said, "Corrupt society stinks."

Last year, he was asked about his secret to happiness. He said slow down. Take time off. Live and let live. Don't proselytize. Work for peace. Work at a job that offers basic human dignity. Don't hold on to negative feelings. Move calmly through life. Enjoy art, books and playfulness.

Sadly, his reign may be less than five years in all, he predicted. As one orthodox cardinal told Mr. Allen, the author, "Bergoglio won't be here forever, but we will." Not true. The Vatican Spring of Pope Francis will outlive many a mortal in church vestments. □

David Brooks is off today.

Kids Who Can't See Can't Learn

By Pamela F. Gallin

LAST year, I went with a small group of ophthalmologists to a South Bronx middle school to conduct vision exams. One neatly dressed boy had trouble seeing the big E at the top of the chart. He hesitated and made mistakes on the second line, and then put his head down, embarrassed. "I don't think you can see the chart," I said.

He told me he couldn't remember ever having an eye exam. I thought he might be an anomaly.

I was wrong. My colleagues and I have conducted 2,400 screenings on students in three New York City middle schools: one in the South Bronx, one in Williamsburg and one in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. We have prescribed and distributed 450 free pairs of glasses to the nearly one-fifth of the kids who had 20/40 vision (which means street signs and chalkboards are blurry) or worse. Many of the kids knew they couldn't see the board, but hadn't thought to ask for a checkup, because their vision had deteriorated gradually.

Children who struggle to see don't tend to make for very good students. At Middle School 223 in the Bronx, the principal reported dramatic differences in several students once they'd received their glasses. An eighth-grade boy who had previously been reprimanded for talking during class stopped being disruptive. When administrators asked

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him what had caused his sudden change in behavior, he explained that he'd been asking other students to help him read the board. A sixth grader who had been notably quiet in class revealed that she had stopped looking at the board because she couldn't read it.

Even more appalling: Of the kids across the three schools who couldn't read the eye chart, 10 percent had vision that was no longer correctable to 20/20, even with glasses or treatment. Many of these kids were born with two healthy eyes but later developed amblyopia, in which the vision in one or both eyes is reduced because the eye and the brain are not working together properly. Had

Like vaccinations, vision tests should be required.

their vision problems been caught earlier, before they were 7 to 9 years old, when their brains could still accommodate changes to the visual cortex, they might be able to see perfectly today. Instead they'll go through the rest of their lives with a visual impairment.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend a comprehensive vision screening around the age of 3½ to 4. New York City has an excellent vision screening program for pre-kindergartners and kindergartners and first and third graders; screenings of fifth graders are ostensibly mandatory but often don't happen. But for too many older students, visits to the pediatrician are infrequent and visions for

screening nonexistent.

Some states mandate vision screenings past the fifth grade. New York is not one of them, which means the onus of regular screenings falls on parents. Parents should take their kids for routine vision screenings, or even use one of the many online vision screenings that are available.

They should also watch for warning signs. A child with poor vision may complain of headaches, or may seem tired or irritable at the end of the day. Decreased vision is a silent condition; if parents don't specifically ask if their children can see the board at school, or read the fine print on a box, problems will go undiagnosed.

But parents can do only so much. Vision screenings need to be taken as seriously as vaccination requirements, and we need uniform standards for school-based vision assessments. Many insurers will not even reimburse providers for eye exams if the result is "only glasses," though Medicaid does.

Furthermore, once kids do get glasses, they sometimes don't wear them, for fear that they will be teased. Teachers and parents must be taught that glasses are not optional.

Federal law gives a child the right to accommodations for a disability, but a child can't exercise that right unless we can determine if a disability exists.

As for the middle-school boy who couldn't see the big E, when I put lenses into a trial frame for him he couldn't believe what he'd been missing. He put down the frame, saying he didn't think his family could afford glasses. When I told him they were free, thanks to a corporate donor, he didn't believe me.

"Really," I said. "Go pick out a frame." "Thank you, Miss," he said. And then he left to choose one. □

presidential candidates, you find that nearly all of them agreed, back during the "Bush boom," that there was no housing bubble and the American economic future was bright; that nearly all of them predicted that the Federal Reserve's efforts to fight the economic crisis that developed when that nonexistent bubble popped would lead to severe inflation; and that nearly all of them predicted that Obamacare, which went fully into effect in 2014, would be a huge job-killer.

Given how badly these predictions turned out — we had the biggest housing bust in history, inflation paranoia has been wrong for six years and counting, and 2014 delivered the best job growth since 1999 — you might think that there would be some room in the G.O.P. for economists who didn't get everything wrong. But there isn't. Having been completely wrong about the economy, like having been completely wrong about Iraq, seems to be a required credential.

What's going on here? My best explanation is that we're witnessing the effects of extreme tribalism. On the modern right, everything is a political litmus test. Anyone who tried to think through the pros and cons of the Iraq war was, by definition, an enemy of President George W. Bush and probably hated America; anyone who questioned whether the Federal Reserve was really debasing the currency was surely an enemy of capitalism and freedom.

It doesn't matter that the skeptics have been proved right. Simply raising questions about the orthodoxies of the moment leads to excommunication, from which there is no coming back. So the only "experts" left standing are those who made all the approved mistakes. It's kind of a fraternity of failure: men and women united by a shared history of getting everything wrong, and refusing to admit it. Will they get the chance to add more chapters to their reign of error? □