
First Lesson: Unlearn How We Learned

By A Look At . . . Getting Back to Basics

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We are facing an educational emergency in this country. You've heard that claim before, of course, but this time there's a twist: Much of the current crisis is the result of policies enacted in the name of improving schools — specifically, in the name of “standards” and “accountability.”

Naturally, this rhetoric finds a ready audience: Who wants to come out against higher standards? But the dirty little secret of American education in the late 1990s is that real learning is being squeezed out of classrooms because people who don't know much about education have decided it's time to get tough.

The top-down, heavy-handed “Tougher Standards” movement has essentially taken over many of our schools, with the full support of business groups, politicians of both parties and many journalists. The primary opposition comes from those who actually do the educating — and, as our children's schools are transformed into giant test-prep centers, increasingly from parents as well.

The first problem is that raising standards has come to mean little more than higher scores on poorly designed standardized tests. The more schools commit themselves to improving performance on these tests, the more meaningful opportunities to learn are sacrificed. Every hour spent drilling students to ace these exams is an hour not spent helping them become creative, critical, curious learners. Thus, the drive for high scores is tantamount to lowering standards—a paradox rarely appreciated by those who make, or report on, education policy.

Children are tested to the point of absurdity in the name of “accountability,” which often turns out to be a code word for more control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms. This has an effect on learning similar to the effect that a noose has on breathing. Particularly counterproductive is the use of bribes and threats to coerce schools and students into raising test scores, including “high-stakes” testing that determines whether students can graduate or even move on to the next grade.

A few years back, a group of Colorado researchers asked some teachers to instruct their students on a specific task. About half the teachers were told that when they were finished, their students must “perform up to standards” and do well on a test about the task. The rest of the teachers, given the identical task to teach, were simply invited to “facilitate the children's learning.” At the end, when all the students were tested, the students in the “standards” classrooms did worse on the task than the other students. The teachers in the standards-oriented classrooms in effect became drill sergeants, removing virtually any opportunity for the students to play an active role in designing their own learning. The teachers were controlled, and they responded by becoming controlling.

This transformation is taking place across the country. One example can stand for thousands: A widely respected middle-school teacher in Wisconsin, famous for helping students create their own innovative learning projects, stood up at a community meeting one evening and announced that he “used to be” a good teacher. These days, he explained, he just handed out textbooks and quizzed his students on what they had memorized. He had changed his teaching approach because he was increasingly being held accountable for test scores. The kind of wide-ranging and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized his classroom could not survive when the emphasis was on preparing students to take a standardized test.

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The consensus that we need tougher standards is closely connected to the notion that we need to go back to basics — what might be called the “bunch o’ facts” model of instruction. Traditionalists typically believe we can make students learn by the sheer force of didactic instruction, by having the teacher stand at the front of the room, perhaps writing on the blackboard while disgorging information that everyone else in the room is supposed to lap up and copy down. The teacher tells; the students listen. And when they aren’t listening, they’re reading things like textbooks in such a way as to absorb information. Then come the quizzes, compulsory recitations and other ways of proving that they remember what they were told.

Here education is conceived as transferring or transmitting facts, pouring knowledge into empty vessels. This transmission model is found in first grade classrooms devoted to the explicit teaching of phonics and in high school honors classes where teachers slap transparencies on the overhead projector and lecture endlessly about Romantic poets or genetic codes. As a rule, the more that standardized tests are used (and their results emphasized), the more we would expect schools to adopt this approach to teaching students of all ages.

This model, which remains the dominant one in the United States, enjoys the advantage of being familiar to most of us from our own days in school. If most parents accept it — and judge teachers and schools on the basis of how efficiently information is poured into their children — it may be because no one has ever invited them to reconsider it. For us to question the reliance on lectures, work sheets, drills and memorization, we must confront the possibility that we spent a good chunk of our childhoods doing stuff that was exactly as pointless as we suspected it was at the time.

But cognitive scientists tell us that we’re not passive receptacles, and learning isn’t just a matter of heaping new information on top of the knowledge we already have. It is a matter of coming across something unexpected, something that can’t easily be explained by the informal theories we have already developed. To resolve that conflict, we have to reorganize our way of understanding so we can accommodate the new reality we’ve just encountered.

The best kind of teaching takes its cue from the understanding that people are active learners. In such a classroom, students are constantly making decisions, becoming participants in their own education. Each is part of a community of learners, coming to understand ideas from the inside out with one another’s help. They still acquire facts and skills, but in a context and for a purpose. Their questions drive the curriculum. Learning to think like scientists and historians matters more than memorizing lists of definitions and dates.

It’s simply not true that one must learn to read before being able to read for understanding; it makes a lot more sense to learn to read by reading for understanding. Exactly the same may be said of math: Wise educators don’t teach addition and subtraction as prerequisites for pursuing interesting problems; they teach these skills through interesting problems. Students — including disadvantaged and “at-risk” students — learn skills most effectively if they’re invited from the beginning to think in

a sophisticated way about the underlying concepts.

Unfortunately, that kind of instruction is rare, and we are paying the price. Many newspapers carried big headlines last year when U.S. high schoolers proved significantly less adept at math than their counterparts around the globe. Less attention was given to the researchers' conclusion that our students are at a disadvantage precisely because of the prevalence of back-to-basics ideology in this country. American classrooms are devoted more to memorizing and practicing rules and skills, at the expense of helping students understand what they're doing.

Consider the way many 13-year-old American students dealt with a problem that appeared in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The question was: "An army bus holds 36 soldiers. If 1,128 soldiers are being bused to their training site, how many buses are needed?" If you divide 1,128 by 36, you get 31 with a remainder of 12, meaning it would take 32 buses to transport the soldiers. Most students did the division correctly, but fewer than one out of four got the question right. The most common answer was "31 remainder 12."

The shrill calls for tougher standards have had the effect of accelerating the kind of instruction that produces this sort of robotic calculation. False claims about new math and the whole-language reading approach have driven out progressive kinds of teaching that help students become better thinkers — and lifelong learners. Also, the most impressive kind of instruction is very difficult to sustain when a central authority decrees a list of disconnected (and soon-to-be-forgotten) stuff that every third- or seventh- or 11th-grader is required to know. That's why one of the chief consequences of the Tougher Standards movement is that some of the best teachers and principals are getting tired — or fired.

The mindless phrase "raising the bar" is based on the assumption that harder is always better — indeed, that the difficulty level of tests or texts is the most important criterion by which to judge them. A growing understanding of the limits of this sensibility helps to explain why a group of Virginia parents has organized in opposition to the Standards of Learning being rammed into that state's classrooms. It's why some educators, students and parents across the country are beginning to consider the possibility of boycotting standardized tests.

The goal here is not to make school "fun" so much as it is to create a learning experience that arouses and sustains children's curiosity, enriching their capacities and responding to their questions in ways that are deeply engaging. Those who share that goal are likely to work to support schooling that is profoundly nontraditional — and of astonishingly higher standards.

SIDEBAR:

Reading, Writing, 'Rithmetic, and Rote

Proponents of traditional education often describe themselves as a brave minority under siege, fighting an uphill battle for old-fashioned forms of teaching that have been driven out of the schools by an educational establishment united in its determination to make radical change.

Such claims represent an inversion of the truth so audacious as to be downright comical. As educational historian Larry Cuban has argued, "Basic ways of schooling children have been remarkably durable over the last hundred years." His review of an enormous body of research demonstrates "the persistent occurrence of teacher-centered practices since the turn of the century." (We used to copy facts from the World Book; today, our kids download them off the World Wide Web. So much for the educational revolution.) If the continued dominance of traditional education isn't always obvious, it may be because we rarely think about how many aspects of

education could be different but aren't. What we take for granted as being necessary features of the school experience are actually reflections of one kind of schooling — the traditional kind.

Consider: Just as we once did, our kids spend most of their time in school with children their own age. Most high school instruction is still divided into 45- or 50-minute periods. Students still have very little to say about what they will do and how they will learn. Good behavior or meritorious academic performance, as determined unilaterally by adults, is still rewarded; deviations are still punished. Grades are still handed out; awards assemblies are still held. Students are still "tracked," particularly in the higher grades, so that some take honors and advanced placement courses while others get "basic" this and "remedial" that. Kids may be permitted to learn in groups periodically, but at the end of the day, eyes still must be kept on one's own paper. Indeed, even from a purely physical standpoint, schools today look much like they did decades ago.

Experimentation with alternative models of teaching wasn't all that widespread even in the 1960s and 1970s, although animated discussion about them may have left the impression that such changes were commonly being implemented. Whatever modest moves toward progressive teaching did take place have largely been rolled back. Even kindergartens are less about exploration and more about teacher-directed skills instruction, despite the nearly unanimous view among early childhood specialists that this is a terrible idea. At all age levels, "traditional mathematics teaching . . . is still the norm in our nation's schools," researcher Michael T. Battista reported earlier this year. Taken as a whole, all this evidence of traditionalism is especially significant in light of widespread claims that our schools are failing. Because anything that might reasonably be called progressive is actually a rarity in American education, it is rather difficult to blame our problems (real or imagined) on these progressive practices. Indeed, the facts have the effect of turning the argument on its head: If students aren't learning effectively, it may be because of the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices.

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