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10 things wrong with what kids learn in school

By Marion Brady

Mainstream media, cued by corporate press releases, routinely claim that America's schools are markedly inferior to schools in other developed nations. The claim is part of an organized, long-running, generously funded campaign to undermine confidence in public schools to "prove" the need to privatize them.

Syndicated columnists, education reporters, editorial boards, and other opinion leaders interested in thoroughly understanding the campaign to privatize public schools should do two things. First, they should stop dismissing all the critics of the Common Core State Standards as Tea Party types opposed to change. As my books, articles, newspaper columns and blogs make clear, I argue that change is not only essential but decades overdue. What I oppose is superficial, dishonest change—change sold by misrepresenting the quality of what preceded the Common Core Standards, half-truths about the process that created the Standards, and hype that's radically over-selling their value.

Second, before taking a position, opinion leaders should examine the "Sandia National Laboratory's Report," [i] and read at least three books: *The Manufactured Crisis*,[ii] by David C. Berliner and David J. Biddle; *Why is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* [iii]by Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian, and Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Educatio*n.[iv] (See endnotes for links.)

I'm an unequivocal supporter of public schooling, and think the historical record, fairly examined, justifies my support. This doesn't mean, however, that I think all was well with America's schools before corporate interests and politicians took control of them. Far from it. Educators have been handicapped for more than a century by a curriculum adopted to serve a too-narrow purpose—admission to college—and failure to address that curriculum's problems has made the institution vulnerable to destructive corporate and political manipulation.

Below are brief descriptions of some of the more obvious of those problems.

1. The standard core curriculum is stuck in the past.

Adopted in the late 19th Century, the curriculum now shaping America's schools reflects the "big idea" of that earlier era—the factory system, standardization of parts, mass production, centralized decision making, and passive worker compliance.

None of those fit the present era. Social change has seen to that, and the rate of that change is accelerating. Change requires adaptation, and adaptation requires creativity, autonomy, exploitation of differing perspectives, and continuous questioning of authority.

2. The standard core curriculum is so inefficient it leaves little or no time for apprenticeships, internships, co-op programs, projects, and other ways of "learning by doing" (which is how most of us learned most of what we know).

How little most adults remember and use of what they once read and heard at the secondary level of schooling testifies to a level of inefficiency that wouldn't be tolerated in any other field or profession.

The main obstacle to efficiency is the assumption that the most important task is "covering the material" in the core curriculum. Given the Internet and ease of access to it, given the vast range of learner abilities, interests, and needs, given the inevitable obsolescence of much existing knowledge, and given our ignorance about what the future holds, stuffing kids' heads with what today's adults happen to know is less important than helping them develop *knowledge-evaluating and generating* skills. Those can be worked into the familiar curriculum without difficulty, but today's reformers, convinced that working longer and harder is better than working smarter, aren't interested.

3. The standard core curriculum gives thought processes other than recall short shrift, or no attention at all.

What gets tested, gets taught. Because, unlike all other thought processes, short-term memory can be measured with precision, traditional testing has emphasized it.

The ability to remember is, of course, important, but the main educational challenge—making better sense of real-world experience—requires the ability not merely to recall but to infer, generalize, hypothesize, relate, synthesize, value, and so on.

When we ask students to recall, evaluation of performance is based mostly on the *quantity* of their responses. But when they're asked to hypothesize or infer, their responses will differ both quantitatively and *qualitatively*. Do two "good" hypotheses equal four "fair" and seven "poor" hypotheses? What's a "fair" hypothesis? A "poor" one?

Recent tests take a weak stab at evaluating "higher order" thought, but the fact remains that machines can't evaluate original thought, and neither can humans using

"canned" criteria. Limiting what's taught to what machines can measure isn't just demeaning, it's a recipe for societal disaster.

4. The standard core curriculum ignores vast and important fields of knowledge.

Give thought to the news of the day, or take a long view of human history, and it will be clear that the greatest threats to life, liberty, and happiness are conflicts stemming from differing value and belief systems within and between societies.

These systems—sometimes called "worldviews"—are the most important and useful thing we can know about ourselves and others, but the standard core curriculum lets learners go from kindergarten through graduate school without examining either their own worldview or those of others.

Neither are the young likely to study the principles of group dynamics (essential knowledge in the workplace). Or societal responses to loss of autonomy. Or the process of polarization. Or the close relationship of economies and group stability. Or the effects of technological change on human relationships. Or the role of emotion in selective perception. Or the dynamics of social change—just to begin a list of critically important knowledge that lies outside the usual curricular boundaries.

5. The standard core curriculum breaks knowledge—and the reality it seeks to explain—apart, ignoring its systemic, mutually supportive nature.

Understanding any major problem—war, poverty, oppression, crime, discrimination, resource depletion, energy sourcing, environmental degradation, taxation, labor-management disputes, corruption, international tensions, whatever—requires an understanding of links between myriad factors and forces. Because those factors and forces invariably cut across subject-matter boundaries, or deal with fields of knowledge not taught at all, the core curriculum fails to produce a citizenry intellectually equipped to cope with the problems it generates.

6. The standard core curriculum emphasizes secondhand rather than firsthand knowledge.

The new big deal in education is "informational reading"—reading that informs. Is it important? Of course. Should it be the main thing that kids do in school? No. Reading and interpreting text is only one of many ways to learn, and not the most important.

The most explosive period of learning occurs in the first years of life, before we learn to read. There are lessons in that fact that our fixation on reading, and our stubborn insistence that play, art, music, theater, dance, and so on, are "frills," keep us from understanding and appreciating.

Schools are still being built with classrooms rather than flexible workspaces. Schedules are still being imposed that keep kids in their seats and isolated from the larger world for most of every day. We're ignoring research and common sense about how humans learn.

7. The standard core curriculum costs a great deal to "deliver."

Failure to explore and exploit the merit of integrated study, use of "canned," commercial instructional materials rather than local resources, overuse of expensive technologies, excessive administrative costs, unnecessary testing and test prep, grade retention from inappropriate curricula and unreasonable pass-fail cut scores on standardized tests—these and other factors tied to an unexamined, taken-for-granted curriculum, waste time and money.

8. The standard core curriculum has no criteria establishing what new knowledge to teach, or what old knowledge to discard to make room for the new.

Knowledge is expanding at an ever-accelerating rate, but no agreed-upon aim, no overarching purpose, no philosophy, sorts through the near-infinite possibilities and constructs a coherent curriculum keyed to life as it's lived.

Today's reforms have us obsessing about the contents of school subjects, when the real challenge is figuring out how to *use* those tools (and subjects not now taught) to produce admirable people, thoughtful citizens, individuals able to capitalize on the potentials of humanness.

9. The standard core curriculum disregards the brain's need for order, organization, and pattern. The theory of learning that dominates traditional schooling is simple: "If you throw enough mud on the wall, some of it is bound to stick." A little does stick, of course, but not enough to justify instruction based on the theory.

The main problem is the brain's inability to cope with unorganized and disorganized information. School subjects organize information, but each one does so differently, and kids—lacking a "master" organizer to logically relate new knowledge to existing knowledge—store it in short-term memory, then erase it when the threat of testing no longer looms.

10. The standard core curriculum is silent on complex ethical and moral questions.

This is difficult territory, which is why it's unacceptable for the curriculum to ignore it.

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Someone once said that moving the education establishment is harder than moving a Jell-O elephant. That's an apt observation, but it doesn't mean that change is impossible, just really hard.

As an administrator and consultant, I've been down the usual reform roads and found only one that actually changes, permanently, how most teachers teach. It verifies that what's common knowledge in management circles is true, that genuine, lasting change can't be imposed top down. If the process doesn't actively involve those whose thorough understanding and acceptance is necessary to make it work, it won't work.

In education, "those whose thorough understanding and acceptance is necessary to make it work" are teachers and kids. What do teachers and kids need to understand and accept?

1. An organized mind is more productive than an unorganized or disorganized mind.
2. School subjects use so many different information organizers the mind can't cope.
3. Systems theory simplifies the organization of knowledge.
4. Systems theory can be learned. Easily. http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp

What do policymakers and school administrators need to understand and accept?

Flying the Standards! banner, the Business Roundtable has been the primary organizer and coordinator of the present thrust of education reform. They've focused on standards for school subjects because, they say (correctly), that standards drive everything else—curriculum, teacher training, and assessment.

Many educators and I believe the Business Roundtable isn't just wrong but spectacularly so. The standards coin has another side. The late authority on urban design, Jane Jacobs, in her book, *Dark Days Ahead,* summed that side up in just six words: "Standardization is the parent of stagnation."

What policymakers and administrators need to understand and accept is that *standards keyed to a fundamentally flawed curriculum are fundamentally flawed* (as, inevitably, are tests keyed to the standards),

The members of the Business Roundtable—rich, politically powerful, and speaking with one voice—will probably get their way. I'm suggesting a way around the creeping but inevitable stagnation that will follow. Adopting the Common Core State Standards doesn't preclude going beyond them by making use of systems theory. Neither does it preclude going beyond the educational performance of Shanghai, Finland, South Korea, or any other system of education anywhere in the world that arbitrarily and artificially fragments the study of reality without an integrating strategy.

Again—here's a link to a simple, free, adolescent-friendly tool for using systems theory as a "supra-disciplinary" organizer of knowledge: http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp

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[i] http://www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk

[ii] http://www.amazon.com/The-Manufactured-Crisis-Americas-Schools/dp/0201441969#reader_0201441969

[iii] http://www.amazon.com/The-Manufactured-Crisis-Americas-Schools/dp201441969#reader_0201441969

[iv] http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/death-and-life-of-the-great-american-school-system-diane-ravitch/1100744292?ean=9780465025572