

*Washington Post*, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss  
Posted March 15, 2017:

## Why even the world’s highest-scoring schools need to change

By Marion Brady

Betsy DeVos, the new U.S. secretary of education, has a theory. She agrees with former Florida governor Jeb Bush and other education “reformers” now shaping American education that what’s wrong with America’s schools has an easy fix: competition in the form of market forces — vouchers, merit pay, charter schools, etc.

DeVos is wrong. Dozens of variables — most of them beyond educator control — affect kids’ ability to learn. Believing that market forces can erase the effects of those variables is magical thinking.

Albert Einstein, Buckminster Fuller, David Bohm, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernest Boyer, Harlan Cleveland, Arthur Koestler, Thomas Merton, Peter Senge, and many other internationally known and respected thinkers [have a different theory](#) about poor learner and school performance. If they’re right, even the world’s highest-scoring schools aren’t serving learners well.

### Here’s why:

1. For efficient, productive thought, information must be mentally organized. The “core” curriculum now in near-universal use worldwide is a poor organizer of information. The thinkers mentioned above all believed that the core curriculum in use in schools since 1893 is fragmented, incoherent, artificial and disconnected from the reality it’s supposed to explain to learners and help them explore.
2. Businesses, industries, the military, and other information-dependent entities don’t use academic disciplines or school subjects to organize information. To cope with reality’s inherent complexity, to more accurately model reality’s systemically integrated nature, and to solve real-world problems, they use systems theory and systems thinking. These focus on looking at the whole of something by considering the connections among its parts and in relation to its environment.

### The situation:

Tradition, institutional inertia, multi-layered bureaucracies, fear of change, textbook publishers, testing companies, uninformed politicians, and upside-down organization charts that put amateurs in charge of experts block educator acceptance of systems thinking as the primary organizer of school curricula. Unfortunately, no plan is in place to address these obstacles to meaningful change.

**A way forward:**

Lasting curricular change is bottom up and voluntary, propelled by the enthusiasm of kids and teachers. The optimum place and time to introduce systems thinking is at the middle-school level, using teacher teams working with small groups, and offering social science, language arts, and humanities credits. Introduce systems thinking to adolescents, and its merit will eventually lead to adoption at other levels of schooling.

Responsibility for evaluating learner performance must be returned to teachers. Commercially produced, standardized, machine scored tests can't attach meaningful numbers to complex or original thought, or access the quality of group dialogue and dynamics.

Here are links to an e-book — [here](#) and [here](#) — that makes the case for systems thinking as the major organizer of schooling, and four illustrative courses of study written for adolescents and older learners. In the spirit of “open source,” all are free to educators who wish to use them—no money, no sign-up, no strings, no obligation. User suggestions for improving the activities can keep them current and continuously adapt them to inevitable social change and local needs.