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# The biggest problem with traditional schooling

By Marion Brady

Fairtest, Parents Across America, Save Our Schools, United Opt-Out National, and regional groups such as Fund Education Now, are fighting to stop the corporate takeover of public education. It’s a David-Goliath match.

They’re up against the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the biggest philanthropic foundations in the world, most of the mainstream media, and the highest-ranking officials in both political parties.

Goliath has money and power, and has been using it for years in a campaign to privatize public schools. Those who oppose Goliath are labeled “defenders of the status quo.” David, coming late to the fight, has neither money nor power, just a warning message and social media for getting that message out.

Believing that public schools are essential to democracy and our way of life, and concerned about how poorly the young are being equipped to deal with a complex, dangerous, unknowable future, I couldn’t be happier about David’s growing clout.

But I want to do more than just stop the destruction. “You never change things by fighting existing reality,” said Buckminster Fuller. “To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

I want to help build that new model.

Decades of teaching adolescents tell me that the single biggest problem kids face with traditional schooling is information overload. So much random, disorganized, disconnected information is dumped on them they can’t come even close to coping with it.

That some seem to do so — collect “A”s and ace standardized tests — can be misleading. They’ve learned to play the simple “Remember” game. But if the game is made more challenging, if, for example, it’s changed to “Infer” or “Hypothesize” or “Synthesize” or “Value,” scores and grades shift, sometimes even reversing the “A”s and the “F”s, the “B”s and the “D”s.

Back in the 1960s, while teaching at Florida State University, I concluded that mental organization is the key to productive, creative thought. The more I studied the matter, the more convinced I became that although the so-called “core curriculum” is an adequate organizer of

school subjects, it's a lousy organizer of general knowledge, and general knowledge is what holds daily life together.

I needed a general organizer for work I was doing with kids attending Florida State University's on-campus K-12 school. I found it in General Systems Theory, as it had developed during World War II. Adding to my confidence in the potential of systems theory for radically improving learner performance is the fact that the very young, long before words like "chemistry," "economics," and "geometry" mean anything to them, know how to make sense, and use systems thinking to do it.

That has to mean that they're using a systemic mental organizer. How quickly they learn to use that organizer to navigate an incredibly complicated world says that the organizer is first rate, and should be put to use. It shouldn't replace school subjects, but integrate and enhance them. The core subjects sometimes run parallel, overlap, or support each other (e.g. science and math, language arts and social studies) but they can't be patched together in any coherent way to create an intellectually manageable, sense-making tool. Systems theory solves that problem. It makes all subjects part of a single, coherent, easily understood, mutually supportive sense making tool.

To me, the core's inherent problems explain why most schooling doesn't "take," why kids are usually bored and disengaged, why adults remember and use so little of what they once "learned" in school at great expense, why K-12 fads and reforms come and go, eventually fading away in a sort of embarrassed silence.

The current multi-billion dollar push to put the Common Core State Standards in place, and write tests for every school subject under the sun, will follow the same path and suffer the same fate. It's as futile as pounding sand down a rat hole. The whole Common Core circus is designed to improve the specialized studies that make up the core curriculum (and it may or may not do that), but what K-12 kids really need is a system for organizing GENERAL knowledge.

They HAVE such a system. But they don't know they have it, so for educational purposes, it isn't doing them any good. It has to be lifted into consciousness, elaborated, and put to intentional use to help them make better sense of themselves, each other, and the world. (And, of course, school subjects.)

Let me try to explain the basics of that system. It's simple, so if it doesn't seem so, it will be because it's taken for granted, and we're not used to looking closely at things we take for granted.

Making sense of something, we do the following:

(a) Locate it in space (in the next block; South Africa; on the top shelf; about six miles north of Hastings).

(b) Locate it in time (after lunch; next week; every ten minutes; October 14, 1066).

(c) Identify the actors (Tom and Huck; union members; Holocaust survivors; Norman and Saxon armies).

(d) Describe the action (took blood samples; built a raft; walked all the way home; fought a battle).

(e) Attribute cause (the road was icy; she lost her temper; too much sugar; to gain control of England).

That done, we relate the five (On October 14, 1066, Norman and Saxon armies met about six miles north of Hastings and fought a battle for control of England).

That's it. Those five kinds of information, (a) through (e), take in and organize all knowledge—school, street, everything. Kids helped to lift them into consciousness, elaborate them in ever-greater detail, relate and make intentional use of them, get smarter quick. They have a powerful tool that helps them cope far more easily with information overload and unlock their creative potential. Once lifted into consciousness, they'll use it for the rest of their lives.

You're skeptical? Of course. That's to be expected. The only people who aren't are those who've helped kids understand the system, and in so doing come to understand it for themselves.

I give away a course of study designed to help teachers of adolescents and older students do that. It's called *Connections: Investigating Reality* <http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp>. And you can see comments from a user here: <http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/BillWebb.pdf>.

Connections isn't a finished product, and never should be. It needs continuous input from teachers who work with kids every day and talk to each other about what worked, what didn't work, and how it could be improved. It needs to be piloted.

But right now, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, Arne Duncan, Bill Gates, Mike Bloomberg, [Eli Broad](#), Andrew Cuomo, Michelle Rhee, [Jeb Bush](#), and others block the way. They've bought the corporate line, and any innovation that doesn't fit with the Common Core Standards in some obvious way, or doesn't lend itself to mass testing, is off limits.

So go, [Fairtest](#), [Parents Across America](#), [Save Our Schools](#), [United Opt-Out National](#), [Fund Education Now](#). If classroom teachers, school principals, and local school boards know you've got their backs, if the National Resolution on High Stakes Testing gets enough signers, I might be able to get a few pilot programs in place.

I'd love to see Connections or some other free, open source, general education teaching tool — a tool owned and operated by working classroom teachers — go head to head with Harcourt Educational Measurement, CTB McGraw-Hill, Riverside Publishing, and NCS Pearson.