What's Worth Learning: How Outdated Curricula Are Failing America's Students

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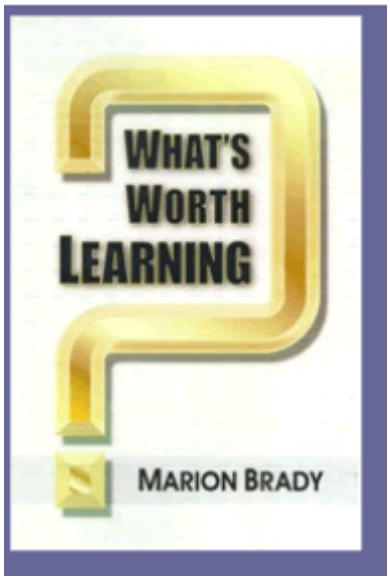

It goes without saying that solving a problem begins with a correct diagnosis of its cause.

When Michael Gerson, President George W. Bush's chief speechwriter, had the president say in a January 2004 speech that American education suffered from "the soft bigotry of low expectations," the simplistic diagnosis reflected and perpetuated the present "tighten the screws" reform effort.

That misguided effort continues. In the Introduction to What's Worth Learning? (Information Age Publishing), I offer an alternative explanation for poor school performance.

Marion Brady

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American education isn't up to the challenge.

The evidence is inescapable. Millions of kids walk away from school long before they're scheduled to graduate. Millions more stay but disengage. Half of those entering the teaching profession soon abandon it. Administrators play musical chairs. Barbed wire surrounds many schools, and police patrol hallways. School bond levies usually fail. Superficial fads—old ideas resurrected with new names—come and go with depressing regularity. Think tanks crank out millions of words of ignored advice, and foundations spend billions to promote seemingly sound ideas that make little or no difference. About a half-trillion dollars a year is invested in education, but most adults remember little and make practical use of even less of what they once learned in thousands of hours of instruction.

Congress and state legislatures bring market forces to bear, certain that the rewards and penalties of competition will work the wonders in education they sometimes work in business, and nothing of consequence happens. Charter schools are formed to promote innovations, but if the merit of those innovations is judged by scores on corporately produced standardized tests, the innovations are inconsequential. Municipal governments take over failing schools or hand them off to corporations, producing results so poor that statistical games must usually be played to justify contract renewals. Stringent standards are put in place, and tests keyed to them are so high-stakes that failure may shut down whole schools, end teaching careers, and permanently affect the life chances of the young. But performance stays flat.

Cut through the hype and the ideology-driven political rhetoric and it's clear that, decade after decade, institutional performance nationwide changes little. Even schools considered models and pointed to with pride—upscale, beautiful, well-staffed, shipping high percentages of their graduates off to the Ivy League—send most students on their ways with talents and abilities unidentified or undeveloped. Few graduate with their natural love of learning enhanced or even intact.

Perhaps most damning of all is the fact that the human need to understand, to know, to make sense of the world, is one of the most powerful of all human drives, but the institutions we've created to meet that deep human need would close their doors if it weren't for mandatory attendance laws, social expectations, and institutional inertia.

The static state of America's schools stems in large part from a failure to understand a process sometimes called "institutionalization" and its implication for what's taught. In educating, the curriculum is where the rubber meets the road.

If it's poor, the education will be poor. No matter state or national standards, no matter the level of rigor, no matter the toughness of tests, teacher skill, school size, market forces imposed, length of school day or year, parental support, design or condition of buildings, generosity of budget, sophistication of technology, administrator wisdom, or enthusiasm of students. A school can be no better than its curriculum allows it to be, and the process of institutionalization, neither understood nor addressed, assures that year after year the traditional math-science-social studies-language arts curriculum will become more dysfunctional.

The process of institutionalization occurs in stages, beautifully explored and elaborated by the late Carroll Quigley in his 1961 Macmillan book, *The Evolution of Civilizations*.

Stage One: A society has challenges—protecting itself from enemies, caring for the sick, obtaining food, maintaining public order. To address the challenges, organizations are formed—armies, hospitals, police forces, schools, and so on—and effective problem-solving policies and procedures are adopted.

Stage Two: Social change gradually alters the nature of the problems the organizations were created to solve—a different kind of enemy threatens, a plague of unknown cause strikes, once-productive soil wears out. As the problems change, the policies and procedures that worked well in Stage One gradually become less appropriate and efficient.

Stage Three: Eventually, the inadequacy of the original problem-solving approaches becomes too obvious to ignore. Fingers of blame are then pointed at those in the problem-solving organization. More rigorous standards are imposed. Supervisory staffs are enlarged. Policy and procedures manuals grow fatter. Penalties for poor performance grow harsher.

Stage Four: Because the basic problem—failure to monitor change and adapt to it—remains unaddressed, the situation becomes more dire. Reacting, authorities tighten procedural screws, then tighten them again. A kind of Catch-22 dynamic takes over, a variation of, "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Stage Five: The organization disintegrates or becomes irrelevant. The once-effective problem-solving policies and procedures either disappear or become meaningless rituals.

Education in America illustrates the first four stages of the five-stage pattern. In the colonial era, the basic educational challenge and the curriculum aligned beautifully. The task was to maintain the way of life of a society made up mostly of farmers and craftspeople, a challenge met primarily by modeling. The young grew up immersed in the real world, watching and working with family and neighbors, learning when to plant and harvest, what to do for a sick horse, how to milk a cow, make clothes, build structures. Apprenticeships passed along more specialized knowledge and skills.

After the Civil War, the factory system, urbanization, concentrated wealth, and floods of immigrants changed the task of educating. Building and maintaining railroads, banks, factories, and other giant enterprises called for a few thinkers and many doers. To meet the new challenge, a system of mass education was put in place. It didn't serve the small leadership class very well, but the "sit down, shut up, listen to the teacher, remember the answers, stand up and line up when the bell rings" regimen was appropriate for the millions headed for repetitive manual labor. Again, the educational problem and the solution aligned well enough to keep the process of institutionalization in check.

In the 1890s, very few students attended college, but those who did presented a problem. They came from secondary schools where, in total, about 40 different subjects were taught, and college admissions officers didn't know how to compare their academic records. The situation, prominent educators felt, called for standardizing high school instructional programs, and a ten-man committee of school administrators was appointed by the National Education Association to undertake the task. They submitted their report in 1892, and the following year their recommendations began to be adopted across America, locking in the pattern in near-universal use today.

Big mistake. Change is in the nature of things, and in order to survive, societies must adapt. As the 20th Century unfolded, America changed. Work became more specialized and complex, international industrial competition increased, corporations grew larger, more impersonal, and less attached to nation states. Jobs requiring physical labor steadily declined in number, consumerism took off, an ever-rising standard of living came to be considered a right, and the Cold War generated a vague, pervasive sense of uneasiness.

America changed, but education in general, and the curriculum in particular, didn't. It needed to explain a radically different world and help the young develop the intellectual equipment to make sense of it, and it failed to do so.

Enter Stage Three, then Four, where we now are. Boredom, passive resistance, truancy, classroom disorder, dropouts, teacher turnover, an explosion of home schooling, an electorate ill-equipped to maintain a democracy, and all the other problems with public education cited in the professional literature and in mainstream media are obvious indicators of institutional failure, of old problem-solving procedures failing to adequately address new realities.

So screws are tightened. Trust in teacher competence and professionalism disappears, their experience, judgment, and firsthand knowledge replaced by ham-handed, top-down, bureaucratic attempts to monitor and control. “Rigor” is in vogue, with a vengeance. Politicians get campaign mileage from slogans—“Standards!” “Accountability!” “No excuses!” School days and years are lengthened, social promotion outlawed, recess and nap times eliminated, Advanced Placement courses installed, then moved to lower grade levels. Educational administrators thought to be tolerant of “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” are replaced by mayors, corporate CEOs, lawyers, and retired military officers. Pay-for-performance schemes are put in place. The message: Screws will continue to be tightened until test scores improve.

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The conventional wisdom (and current policy) say that what’s called for is the STEM curriculum—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. I disagree, and *What’s Worth Learning?* offers an alternative.