

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss

August 31, 2013, 1:30 PM

A quiz on America’s core curriculum

By Marion Brady

It should be self-evident that a democracy can’t function without an educated citizenry. It follows, then, that when leaders of business and industry buy a particular theory about educating and sell it to the politicians who write education policy, responsible citizens will try to understand that theory well enough to make informed judgments about it.

To that end, I’ve put together a little quiz.

But first, a bit of background. The key word that drives the present corporate-influenced education reform movement is “rigor.” Its supporters assume that teachers and kids have been getting off easy for decades, so a tough “no excuses” regimen is long overdue.

For starters: Make teaching a precarious occupation. Tie pay to test scores. Put teachers on annual contracts to make firing them easier. Stop respecting teacher judgment. Assign grades to schools and close the troubled ones or, preferably, hand them over to charter chains. Abolish recess. Lengthen school days and years. Cut out art, music, physical education, free reading, and other frills and use the time to hammer academics.

Most importantly, *tighten the curriculum screws*. Focus with intensity on the “core” subjects—math, science, language arts, and social studies. Write standards that tell teachers what to teach, monitor them continuously to make sure they don’t go off script, and give their students high-stakes tests to keep them on their toes. Give the screw-tightening strategy an impressive name that appeals to the conventional wisdom.

Do all this quietly, then roll it out with a massive public relations campaign. Give money to prestigious organizations and media outlets in exchange for support and good press. Say that educators wrote the standards and that, unlike all previous top-down education reform efforts, this one will work because it’s not optional. Get high-profile public figures to write laudatory op-eds arguing that the Common Core State Standards and non-stop do-or-die testing will turn America’s coddled kids into world-beating critical thinkers and innovators. Don’t respond to opponents’ criticisms of the standards, just accuse them of being against educational progress.

I’ve a different theory about the performance plateau American education has occupied for the last 150 or so years. Notwithstanding the fact that just about everybody in the world, educators included, take the adequacy of the familiar core curriculum for granted, I’m convinced this 19th Century teaching tool is deeply flawed. I have a list of 20 or so of its problems that I believe create a performance ceiling above which it’s all but impossible to go.

Below are 10 of those characteristics in the form of statements. Since almost every reader’s education will have been shaped by the core curriculum, memory should provide sufficient perspective to allow an opinion to be expressed. Spend a couple of minutes with the quiz and decide for yourself if the familiar core curriculum is so problem-free it’s appropriate to standardize it and lock it in permanent place with the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes testing.

Quiz:

Each of the following ten items is a statement about the familiar, traditional core curriculum. If you consider the statement completely true, place a “10” in the space provided. If you consider the statement completely false, enter a “0.” Use numbers “1” through “9” to indicate differing levels of confidence (low to high) in the core’s adequacy in regard to that particular quiz item.

The core curriculum:

_____ Has a clear, precise, overarching aim understood and agreed-upon by all taxpayers, parents, teachers, and learners.

_____ Routinely requires learners to use complex thought—to recall, yes, but to also infer, hypothesize, relate, generalize, value, and so on.

_____ Is perceived by learners as unfailingly relevant to their “here and now” situations, conditions, interests, and needs, and therefore worth learning and remembering.

_____ Adequately reflects the myriad ways humans learn (via art, music, physical movement, free play, peer interaction, advertising, mass media, parental example, and so on).

_____ Has built-in mechanisms forcing it to adapt to social change and local, regional, and other differences and needs.

_____ Balances the passive development of reading and other symbol manipulation skills with active, hands-on, firsthand interaction with the real world.

_____ Puts school subjects in proper perspective—not as content to be mastered, but as means to the end of improved sense-making and pursuit of “richness in life and living” goals.

_____ Is realistic in its assumptions about the amount of information the average learner can thoroughly understand and absorb in the instructional time provided.

_____ Is implemented in ways that reflect research on matters such as retention in grade, class size, the value of teamwork, learners’ need for a sense of autonomy, and so on.

_____ Consistently stimulates learner initiative, imagination, curiosity, creativity, and motivation.

_____ **Add your scores. (A number less than 100 indicates unsolved problems.)**

##

It takes no reading between the lines to see that I’m far from being an apologist for the educational status quo. I’m not a critic of standards as tools for reform, but insist that proper ones don’t attach to school subjects but to the qualities of mind, emotion, and character it’s hoped the study of school subjects promotes. Imagine, for example, the consequences of a policy that says the main aim of schooling is to send the young on their way with a permanent love of learning.

Not going to happen. As written, the Common Core State Standards will cause at least some teachers to think freshly about what they’re doing, and that’s a good thing. It’s also true that practices that emerge from adopting the Standards may address some of the core’s problems.

But benefits must be weighed against costs. If your score on the quiz was anything less than 100, you’re noting a problem or problems that should surely be addressed *before* making the

standards mandatory. If, for example, all education stakeholders don't share a clear idea about the purpose of schooling (Item 1), or if the kinds of thought processes in which learners engage isn't important (Item 2), and so on, no combination of market forces, no regimen of rigor, no gradual "raising of the bar," no lengthening of the school day or year, and no besting of Finland or Singapore test scores will equip the young to cope with what lies ahead. If I'm right about the inadequacies of the core curriculum, tightening its screws with the Common Core will make it worse.

Assumptions, unexamined, stop fresh thinking dead in its tracks. Assume that today's school subjects are the human brain's best shot at organizing and analyzing information, freeze that assumption in place with the Common Core State Standards, and the door to meaningful education reform in America will slam shut. If it ever opens, it will probably be in some other country, one that's already been down the standards and testing road and discovered it went nowhere.