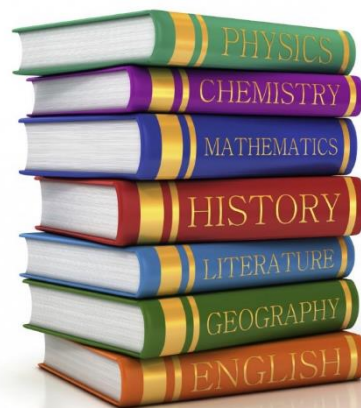


Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss.
Posted August 27, 2016:

Why school is a “confusing mental mish-mash” for kids

Marion Brady is a veteran educator who has long argued that public education needs a paradigm shift. Here is a new piece in which he explains why schools need a complete transformation in what and how students learn, and why the Common Core State Standards, standardized tests and other elements of corporate-influenced school reform can’t accomplish this.

Brady says that “it frustrates” him enormously that so many high-profile politicians who consider themselves liberal and progressive are fans of the Common Core State Standards and of the high-stakes standardized tests the standards enable. He invites public responses to this post from the advocacy group Democrats For Education Reform and other organizations convinced of the adequacy of the Common Core State Standards.



By Marion Brady

The federal and state education reform initiatives kicked off about a quarter-century ago by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation assume the following: that the institution itself is basically sound, that teachers bear major blame for poor school performance, that the Common Core State Standards tell teachers what to say and kids what to remember, that bringing market forces to bear will make them do it, and that high-stakes tests monitor what’s important.

Those six assumptions shape American education policy, and they’re all false. Today’s reform initiative began with a wrong diagnosis of what ails the institution and, by its own measure — standardized testing — the initiative has failed. By all other measures, the initiative hasn’t just failed, it has been an institution-destroying catastrophe.

Responding to public protest, Congress recently went through the motions of loosening its grip on schooling. But not understanding the problem, it refused to abandon the sixth assumption, that standardized tests measure what’s important.

They don’t because they can’t.

Here's why

Consider, please, this paragraph:

We want a pair of socks. Those available are knitted in Third World countries. Power to run the knitting machines is supplied by burning fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels contributes to global warming. Global warming alters weather patterns. Altered weather patterns trigger environmental catastrophes. Environmental catastrophes destroy infrastructure. Money spent for infrastructure replacement isn't available for health care. Declines in the quality of health care affect mortality rates.

Buying socks is a matter of life and death. Whether or not you think buying socks and mortality rates are connected; study the paragraph. It contains nine statements of fact—the kind of information kids are expected to remember long enough to pass tests.

But isolate the nine statements of fact from each other, or change the order in which they appear, and sense changes to nonsense. What makes the paragraph make sense aren't facts but *relationships, relationships between and among aspects of reality.*

Learners discover and deepen their understanding of such relationships by inferring, imagining, hypothesizing, predicting, sequencing, extrapolating, valuing, generalizing, and so on—*thought processes too complex and interwoven to be evaluated by standardized tests.*

Billions of dollars, trillions of hours, and intellectual potential beyond measure, are being wasted on tests that dumb kids down because they can't measure complex thought.

Blame the core curriculum. Think I'm wrong? The core is [fundamentally flawed](#).

What's happening?

The core *curriculum* has major problems. The core *subjects* are important, but they're being dumped on kids many years too soon. Their number, specialized vocabularies, differing conceptual organizers, varying levels of abstractness, and their disconnectedness from each other and from life as kids live it, create a confusing mental mish-mash.

The ridiculous rate at which law and custom require the core courses to be “covered” adds to the confusion. Under enormous pressure, kids store enough information in short-term memory to make their elders think they've learned, but they've no intention of remembering it, and don't.

In matters of the mind, kids are expected to run before they've crawled or walked, and the Common Core State Standards make the mish-mash, information overload problem much worse. Specialized studies — which the core subjects are — should be offered no earlier than high school.

Crawling, walking

The solution to the problem could hardly be simpler. We're born "pre-wired" to make sense. Whatever we're thinking about we locate in space and time, identify participants, describe action, and assume or attribute cause for the action. In simpler language, *when we think about something, we seek—in sufficient detail to adequately communicate—answers to five questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?*

Those are our *primary* information organizers. School subjects are *secondary* organizers, elaborating our primary organizers as necessary to make sense—not much to arrange to meet someone for coffee, more to complete a police report of a crime scene or describe a social problem, a great deal more to trace the causes of an international crisis or the trends of an era.

At least up through middle school the emphasis should be on mastering the basics of sense making—*exploring in hundreds of different ways the systemic relationships of our five primary organizers of information.*

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Three illustrative how-to-do-it courses of study for middle school students:

- Improving the sense-making process: [Connections: Investigating Reality](#),
- Applying the process—American history: <http://www.marionbrady.com/AHH.asp>
- Applying the process—World history:
<http://www.marionbrady.com/WorldHistory.asp>
