

Institutional crisis

By Marion Brady, Guest Columnist, *Orlando Sentinel* (published on-line August 12, 2022, print edition August 18, 2022)

“Jeb Bush wants more accountability in schools,” reads the headline on page three of the *Orlando Sentinel*’s July 31 Local & State news. Columnist Scott Maxwell agrees, but says voucher schools should be held to the same standards as traditionally funded schools. Bush doesn’t respond because vouchers play a major role in the back-door campaign to privatize public schooling.

American education is in crisis, a victim of ridiculous partisan political issues and simplistic ideology-driven “reforms,” but also of problems of its own making. Healthy institutions steadily improve as each generation “stands on the shoulders” of the previous generation, and that hasn’t happened in education. The major reason is the “core” curriculum adopted in 1893 that still organizes most of the middle school and high school day. It was poor in 1893, and continues to block progress.

In the century-plus years since the core’s adoption, advances in the field of medicine have been spectacular, sometimes almost miraculous. Schooling has changed so little, our ancestors lucky enough to go to school would quickly feel at home in most of today’s classrooms. Google and other internet resources notwithstanding, what still pays off is the amount of secondhand textbook text and teacher talk learners can recall long enough to recite and pass quizzes and tests.

Put much of the blame for educating’s lack of progress on unexamined assumptions.

Unexamined Assumption: *Competition is the primary driver of institutional improvement.*

That’s often true, but not in education. What motivates good schooling most powerfully is the human need to understand, solve problems, make sense of experience, and satisfy curiosity. Competition is counterproductive. It subverts learning that’s self-propelling because it’s a genuine source of deep personal satisfaction.

Unexamined Assumption: *The “core” curriculum that organizes most of the middle and high school day provides a “well-rounded” education.*

I have dozens of direct [quotes](#) from nationally and internationally known and respected intellectuals, and studies from the American Association of Colleges and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, all saying the core fails. It organizes information by stand-alone, disconnected school subjects at odds with the seamless, systemic way the human brain learns.

We’re born with brains “pre-wired” to learn by relating information—connecting things not previously thought to relate: Crying relates to nipples with food; parental smiles relate to attempts to learn to walk; ocean tides relate to moon; brain damage relates to lead ingestion; earthquakes relate to tectonic plate movement; academic performance

relates to learner sense of autonomy; fascism relates to fear and uncertainty; societal stability relates to justice; time relates to space.

To kick-start generation-to-generation improvement in academic performance, schooling's primary focus must shift from learner ability to *recall* existing information, to knowledge-expanding learner ability to *relate* information.

Why relating teaches so effectively may not be apparent. Think of *relating* as the hub of the wheel of learning, and thought processes—inferring, hypothesizing, imagining, extrapolating, synthesizing, estimating, intuiting, predicting, generalizing and so on—as spokes in the learning wheel. The more spokes, the stronger the wheel.

Which leads to another unexamined assumption: *Standardized test scores should shape education policy.*

Of the dozens of thought processes and countless combinations of thought processes that enable routine human functioning and civilized life, only two—*recalling*, and sometimes, *applying* recalled information to a matter chosen by the writer of a test item—are simple. The rest are far too complex to be evaluated by machine-scored standardized tests. It's a truism in schooling that what doesn't get tested doesn't get taught, and the quality of learner thought isn't being tested.

“Civilization,” wrote H. G. Wells, “is a race between education and catastrophe.” It's late in the race and catastrophe's lead is so great I'm not optimistic about the outcome, but America surely owes the young a serious effort to prepare them for probable and possible futures.

If I could call the shots, I'd declare an education emergency and convene a conference of middle school leaders. I'd ask them to re-read their “This We Believe,” document, take the next step beyond interdisciplinary studies and see all school subjects as working parts of systemically integrated wholes much greater than their sum.

Tearing down the artificial, arbitrary walls between and among school subjects would maximize the relating process that expands individual and collective knowledge and allow general education aims to be met in a couple of hours. That would free the rest of the day for schools to do what they say is their purpose but almost never actually do—identify and develop the interests and abilities the young bring with them to school.

Doing so could save the planet from our collective incompetence.

##