

Leaving Children Behind by Dan Jacoby

With all the talk about how our education system needs improvement, there is one area that is being ignored.

Everybody talks about the need for more money. Everybody talks about paying teachers more, adding teachers, reducing class size, building new schools and modernizing the ones we have, etc., etc. And all of these things are going to cost billions of dollars.

In addition, everybody talks about setting higher standards – whatever that means. Everybody talks about “getting back to basics” – again, whatever that means. Of course, the only “solution” people have when pressed for details is to add more standardized tests. These tests are practically worthless, for two reasons. First, they don’t test most things our children need to learn. Second, instead of teaching the subjects, or teaching their kids, these tests force teachers to spend far too much time teaching to the test.

But nobody seems to be talking about the state of our state’s education curriculum. A better curriculum would significantly improve education without costing billions of dollars.

With math, the curriculum stinks. In the lower levels, children are expected to absorb concepts by osmosis, while they spend those years not learning the basics, like arithmetic. Later, the curriculum fails to build on the foundation that wasn’t constructed in those early years. Meanwhile, they encounter complex terms beyond their ability to comprehend (like “addition facts”), rather than simple terms (like “problem”) that they can understand easily. Finally, the curriculum becomes more and more scattershot, jumping between totally unrelated topics every few days. The effect is that children don’t get a good grounding in the basics, don’t build on that grounding, and don’t get the kind of systematic approach that allows them to retain what they’ve been “taught”.

Is it any wonder they don’t learn?

If other subjects, like English, the sciences, history, social studies, etc., are as poorly planned, our schoolchildren are doomed to fall behind. And without having checked these subjects personally, I’d say it’s a safe bet that this is the case.

So what needs to be done?

First, the current curriculum needs to be scrapped. Next, we should start from scratch to create a set of basic concepts that the new curriculum should follow – in other words, the subject should be broken down into components. After creating the basic concept set, new learning standards should be established. Finally, methods for determining when children (and teachers) are meeting these standards should be fashioned.

Meanwhile, two essential facts must constantly serve as guideposts. First, each step in a curriculum must build upon previous steps; only that way can children be expected to retain what they’ve learned. Second, education is an art, not a science. Teachers are artists, and artists all have individual style. The “one size fits all” approach is a recipe for disaster.

Once these steps are taken, then – and only then – can a curriculum be produced that meets all the guidelines. Take these steps, in order, and then we can teach our children; fail to take these steps, and we fail our children.