

# ***The Seamless Web: Minnesota's New Education System***

## **18 What Works in Education**

Under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan and Secretary of Education Bill Bennett, the Department of Education published a booklet called *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, 2nd Edition. This 86-page document contained a series of statements which summarize those educational practices which have proven to be effective. The most significant of these findings are printed below. The reader will recognize, however, that the revolution in education is taking us on a path that is very different from, and is often the opposite to, the research findings listed below:

- 1. Children improve their reading ability by reading a lot. Reading achievement is directly related to the amount of reading children do in school and outside.**
- 2. Children get a better start in reading if they are taught phonics. Learning phonics helps them to understand the relationship between letters and sounds and to "break the code" that links the words they hear and the words they see in print.**
- 3. How much time students are actively engaged in learning contributes strongly to their achievement. The amount of time available for learning is determined by the instructional and management skills of the teacher and the priorities set by the school administration.**
- 4. When teachers explain exactly what students are expected to learn, and demonstrate the steps needed to accomplish a particular academic task, students learn more.**
- 5. Memorizing can help students absorb and retain factual information on which understanding and critical thought are based.**
- 6. Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it.**
- 7. Well-designed homework assignments relate directly to classwork and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed.**
- 8. Schools that encourage academic achievement focus on the importance of scholastic success and on maintaining order and discipline.**
- 9. The stronger the emphasis on academic courses, the more advanced the subject matter, and the more rigorous the textbooks, the more high school students learn. Subjects that are learned mainly in school rather than at home, such as science and math, are most influenced by the number and kind of courses taken.**
- 10. Skimpy requirements and declining enrollments in history classes are contributing to a decline in students' knowledge of the past.**
- 11. Business leaders report that students with solid basic skills and positive work attitudes are more likely to find and keep jobs than students with vocational skills alone.**
- 12. Good school leaders protect the school day for teaching and learning. They do this by keeping teachers' administrative chores and classroom interruptions to a minimum.<sup>145</sup>**

Why don't the architects of the new system of education take this information about what works in education into account? The reason, as they have said so many times, is they want to reinvent education, not improve it. These central planners are unaffected by factual information about what actually works and what does not.

One of the most useful descriptions of what works in education and what does not is provided in the book by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., called *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them*. (Hirsch's approach to education, known as "core knowledge," has proven to be a highly effective educational strategy.) In this scholarly work, Hirsch argues that the shortcomings in our schools are primarily the result of the misguided theories of progressive education as opposed to knowledge-based education. Some of Hirsch's observations are included in his glossary. They include:

**"Accessing skills."** A phrase used to define an aspect of "learning to learn."...[The] idea that it is better to learn how than to learn a lot of soon-to-be-outmoded facts....[In reality, however,] a general ability to learn new competencies never consists solely of accessing strategies but also entails familiarity with the most important knowledge in mathematics, the sciences, the humanities and the arts.

**"Authentic Assessments."** A laudatory term for "performance assessments," where students receive grades for their performance on realistic tasks....They are not appropriate for large-scale, high stakes testing because no one has been able, even in theory, to make such tests fair and accurate at reasonable cost in money and time.

**"Critical-thinking skills."** A phrase that implies an ability to analyze ideas and solve problems while taking a sufficiently independent, "critical" stance toward authority.... To [describe] "critical thinking" and "mere facts" [as opposites] is a profound empirical mistake. Common sense and cognitive psychology alike support the Jeffersonian view that critical thinking depends upon factual knowledge.

**"Discovery Learning."** The phrase refers to the teaching method which sets up projects or problems so that students can discover knowledge for themselves through hands-on experience and problem solving rather than through textbooks and lectures....Research into teaching methods has consistently shown that discovery learning is the least effective method of instruction in the teacher's repertory.

**"Drill and Kill."** A disparaging description of the pedagogical tool of drill practice to teach children skills....The [importance of drill] is strongly supported by cognitive psychologists and neurophysiologists who have shown that many skills require repeated experience and "distributed practice" to be learned.

**"Facts are inferior to understanding."** The opposition expressed in this and similar phrases between facts and understanding is a hallmark of progressivism.... understanding depends on facts, it is simply contradictory to praise understanding and to disparage facts....Facts are central to "higher order thinking skills," and therefore need to be emphasized.... "Hands-on Learning." A phrase that implies the superiority of direct, tactile, lifelike learning to indirect, verbal, rote memorization. Very often the term "hands-on" is an honorific term used to praise the progressivist "project method" of education and to disparage "Whole-class instruction,"...The research suggests that such [project] methods are uncertain, unfair (not all children learn from them) and inefficient, and therefore should be used sparingly.

**"Higher-order skills."** A phrase for the superior thinking skills that many current educational reforms hope to achieve....If in fact the learning of higher-order skills did suffice to produce critical thinkers prepared for the challenges of the 21st century, we and our students would be very fortunate indeed and could forgo a great deal of the hard work associated with gaining factual knowledge and well-practiced operational skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Since, unfortunately, this tool conception is incorrect, the outlook for the effectiveness of such "reforms" is dim.

**"Portfolio assessment."** A phrase for a version of performance-based assessment. In portfolio assessment, students preserve in a portfolio all or some of their production during the course of the semester or year....It has proven to be virtually useless for large-scale, high-stakes testing.

**"Whole-language instruction."** A phrase denoting an approach to the teaching of reading that emphasizes the joy of good literature and avoids drill-like instruction in letter sounds....After large-scale experience with [whole-language] with its unsatisfactory results, especially in California, some former adherents of whole language now advocate a "mixed" approach....No well-regarded scholar in the field of reading now advocates an approach that neglects phonics and phonemic awareness. Many experts believe that with proper instruction nearly every child can read at grade level by the end of the first or second grade.<sup>146</sup>

What changes should we make in our schools? Hirsch says we should throw out the misguided practices of progressivism which have proven to not work and replace them with proven strategies of academic instruction in the core subjects.

Hirsch says our overall choice in education is simple: we can continue to dig ourselves deeper into the hole created by the failed theories of progressivism where every new "reform" makes matters worse, or we can return to basing our educational policies on knowledge-based strategies that have been proven to work.

Is it that simple? The evidence says that it is.

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Notes:

145. United States Department of Education, *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*, Second Edition (Washington D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office), 1987, pp. 8 - 81.

146. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 243 - 271.