

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the day, what really matters when it comes to the education of children? After the school doors are locked and the politicians have gone home, do parents really care what credentials their children's teachers have obtained, or how many students are in each class, or how many hours their children sat at a desk, or the condition of the plumbing in their children's school buildings? They care, but only as it relates to whether or not their children are doing well in school.

No matter who we are, we want our children to succeed. We want their generation to do better than ours, and obtaining a quality education is an important cornerstone of their future success. In almost every circumstance, becoming a productive, independent healthy adult requires literacy, and it is the opportunity for literacy that has been promised to every child entering our public education system.

This difficult time in American history clearly illustrates the need for a literate citizenry. Behind the touching displays of patriotism are serious questions. What does it mean to be an American? Why is our system of governance and enterprise so unique? What does freedom of thought, speech and belief mean in America compared to much of the rest of the world? What is required to maintain freedom? These are weighty matters that deserve genuine reflection and debate, the type that can only come from a literate people.

If an additional reminder is necessary as to why literacy matters, we need only to look back at the 2000 presidential election. In the two Florida counties, Miami-Dade and Broward, where the controversial ballots were cast, between one-third and one-half of all adults are functionally illiterate. As *Wall Street Journal*

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columnist Holman W. Jenkins Jr. said, "People who can't read or write may be capable of making perfectly realistic political judgments, but they're going to have a harder time translating this into a clean ballot."

In 1992, the National Adult Literacy Survey developed classification system to determine the impact of low literacy among adults. The five levels they created are now commonly used to classify adults' literacy skills ranging from Level 1, where adults cannot read well enough to fill out a job application or read a food label, to Level 5, where adults can read, comprehend and assimilate complex material. One in four Americans is considered to be at Level 1. What does this mean? According to the National Institute for Literacy, it means the following:

- **Employment Status:** Adults at Level 1 worked an average of 19 weeks a year, compared to an average of 44 weeks per year for those at Level 5.
- **Income:** Adults at Level 1 earned a median income less than one-third that of adults at Level 5.
- **Poverty:** Some 43 percent of adults at Level 1 were living in poverty, compared to 4 percent at Level 5.
- **Welfare:** Three out of four food stamp recipients performed at the two lowest literacy levels.
- **Crime:** Seven out of ten prisoners performed at the lowest two literacy levels.

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How do we achieve higher levels of literacy for all citizens, beginning with our youth?

Two schools of thought have always existed regarding how best to educate children: the progressive and the classical. Broadly speaking, the progressivist contends that, since children are naturally enthusiastic about learning, most will eventually choose to learn that which is necessary; if not, they can be guided to it. Progressivists believe that the body of necessary knowledge changes frequently making the *process* of learning of equal or greater value than learning facts and knowledge. Higher and lower-order thinking routinely mix regardless of age or academic background. Since knowledge and the methods by which

it is disseminated change frequently, it's imperative to the progressivist to centralize content, methods, assessment and delivery systems to ensure uniform results for all children, especially the disadvantaged.

The second philosophy presumes that an identifiable and unchanging base of knowledge and skills exists for all people in all times, and that higher order thinking can only be built on a foundation of rudimentary, unchanging facts and knowledge. Classicists maintain that all young people regardless of age, socioeconomic

background or interest level benefit from a specific and progressive course of study. They presume that a principal obligation of primary and secondary education is to transmit essential knowledge and skills through teachers and teaching tools. Though classicists generally agree on academic content and the end goals of education,

they differ broadly on the best instructional and delivery systems. Some adamantly maintain that a rigidly structured system is essential; others are quite elastic and eclectic.

While remarkable discoveries have been made regarding how students learn and the best instructional strategies to use to teach various types of students, actual academic results are quite unsettling. Students of all socioeconomic backgrounds are underachieving, an outcome of education reform efforts that have too often been based on extrapolation and speculation instead of scientific discovery and documented experience. This may be because the reigning pedagogical and ideological selection falls to the interest groups with the greatest political capital. As a result, our public education system has become, at best, a patchwork of arrangements and traditions; at worst, a treacherous maze.

It is very difficult for school directors to successfully govern. Sentiment from teachers and administrators indicate it's no picnic for them either. We believe significant change in education is not too far around the corner, but that it will likely disturb many people in all ideological camps because of its decentralized nature.

After all, the age of technology has just begun. What children learn, the amount they will absorb and how they will obtain knowledge and skills will change sig-

nificantly. We should guide this change, but not be afraid of it.

In the not-too-distant future, education will be provided where and when students and their parents can best access it. The venues and calendar will change. Colleges of education are used to arranging education menus and timelines, forcing education consumers to adhere to what the academicians think is best. The time for this patronizing behavior is coming to a close. Remember when the grocery store just sold groceries? Now we can also buy fishing worms, get a flu shot and take home a ready-made dinner. The market responded to consumer needs. The same thing will eventually happen in education.

Schools will have to make more efficient use of resources, and this does not mean blindfolded march toward cost cutting. It means improving student performance by weighing costs and benefits.

When it's all said and done, education reforms that work are not large, wholesale endeavors. Success is achieved in decentralized environments where innovation and experimentation are encouraged, academic essentials are paramount, consumers are king and success by students and educators is rewarded.

The chapters in this book contain just a smattering of issues that matter to school directors, teachers and parents. We hope it will spark discussion about alternatives. This document will be followed with a major study on student assessments as well as a journal chronicling the incredible opportunities for schools and parents provided by distance learning.

Children's time is valuable and so is the heritage of literacy we are duty-bound to leave them. In terms of education, at the end of the day, that's what matters.

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