

## Can we ever attain a balanced curriculum?

Written by Dr. Louis Wildman

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At the start of this school year I spoke with a friend of mine who teaches in a local elementary school. I had just returned from Africa, and I offered to share my pictures with his class. He said his class couldn't take time for that, even though they were studying Africa. He said he must follow a script, and spending an hour talking about what I saw in Kenya this past summer, wouldn't fit.

Unfortunately, schools have got to this point because for too long, many teachers passed students who couldn't do what they said they could do. In some extreme cases, students were graduated from high school who could barely read. Legislators were naturally upset when student grades showed that the students were doing quite well, but the test scores showed a different picture. Hence, legislators passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation which penalizes a school if test scores do not improve. In response, school districts have told teachers to teach a prescribed curriculum supposedly aligned with the tests.

The problem with this is that it places too much emphasis upon teaching to a test, and virtually no emphasis upon developing the individual talents and abilities of each student. Public schools have two basic purposes: to pass on basic knowledge to the next generation, and to develop the talents and abilities of each child.

What the state believes is basic knowledge is organized in state curriculum frameworks. For example, the Eighth Grade California Language Arts Framework includes lists of objectives or curriculum standards, such as to "use correct spelling conventions," and to "analyze idioms, analogies, metaphors, and similes to infer the literal and figurative meanings of phrases."

While these are important standards, concentrating education on the learning of pre-defined standards results in a vision of the ideal student as a quiz show champion, rapidly able to correctly respond to questions for which there are right answers. This concept differs from the vision of an entrepreneur or scientist—innovative, creative, inquisitive, motivated people, seeking new knowledge. What is needed is a vision of education which balances pre-existing understandings, as well as aides, assists, and promotes student creativity and student interests.

This is not a new vision of education. Isocrates emphasized "informing students" about the past, while Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle emphasized helping students search for virtue. Immanuel Kant said that "education partly teaches man something and partly merely develops something within him." The historian, Russel Nye, thought American public education should do both, to meet both Jacksonian and Jeffersonian demands:

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We need, for the continuance of our society, education in conformity—that is, training in the standardized procedures of learning such as reading, writing, science, mathematics, language, and logic, to provide for everyone a decent competency for citizenship and the daily problems of living. This meets the Jacksonian test. We also need education in creativity that develops the individual, un-standardizes him, frees his natural, personal talent, and encourages creators, leaders, even nonconformists. This meets the Jeffersonian test—and it is the kind of education that we are most in danger of neglecting today.

Yes, the country needs employees with basic skills, but the future of the American workforce depends upon workers who can identify and creatively solve problems. American workers can not compete globally in terms of low labor costs. American workers can only compete when they offer better ideas. I fear that standardization is sapping the innovative spirit out of students and teachers.

We should take note that for more than 1,000 years, China has had a prescribed curriculum and assessment system like what we have now created, yet China realizes that it needs to change its “test-oriented education” into a “talent-oriented” educational system.

Why is it that the so-called “pendulum” has to always swing so far in either direction? What we need is a balance—schools committed to standards and student engagement.

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