Progressive Education: One Parent's Journey

By Rob Kremer

My interest in education started just like many parents: deciding on the best school for my children. I had recently moved back to Oregon with my wife and two kids after spending a decade in Chicago. As our children reached school age, my wife and I spent a lot of time investigating different schools and different teaching philosophies in order to make an informed choice about where to send our kids.

I didn't have a lot of background knowledge upon which to base my impressions, but after months of visiting schools, talking with teachers and principals and other parents, what we wanted for our kids started to become clear. Most of the schools we looked into spoke in pretty much the same language— a language that really made sense to us. Education should be a journey of discovery, not some exercise in cramming a child's brain with facts, dates and figures. Kids should make this journey by engaging in meaningful projects and activities designed to develop higher-order thinking skills, rather than by sitting through dry lectures or being drilled for rote memorization of factual information.

Most of the schools we visited, both public and private, used some variation of this philosophy, which goes by many names but can be generally referred to as "progressive education." There seemed to be a solid consensus among the educators that the progressive education philosophy and the teaching methods that spring from it constitute the "best practices" in schooling.

We were most impressed by the version of progressive education adopted by the Riverdale School District, called the "Coalition of Essential Schools" model. The Coalition model was developed by Ted Sizer, a well-known Harvard educated reformer/guru who did most of his development work out of Brown University. The principles of the Coalition model seemed very well thought out, and the staff at Riverdale understood and supported them. So we bought a fixer-upper house in the district, and enrolled our kids in Riverdale Elementary School.

At about the same time, I started a job administering a large federal education grant project that sought to advance progressive education principles in the teaching of math and science in the northwest region of the United States. The philosophy and teaching methods the project advocated were right in line with the approach used at Riverdale, which gave us comfort that we had chosen the right school.

My new job gave me the opportunity to dive deep into the education industry. I reviewed research on education methods, talked with educators at all levels, and read extensively about pedagogy, educational principles, and philosophies. My personal journey of discovery took me through every nook and cranny of the education establishment and the challenges it faces: the standards-setting organizations, assessment methods, special education, learning disabilities, the achievement gap, colleges of education, the role of the various associations, teacher certification, the federal and state bureaucracies, and the history of public education in the US.

I was in a somewhat unique place: it was my job to become an expert on the progressive education philosophy and practice, and at the same time my own children were starting their academic careers at a school wholly committed to its principles. I was able, therefore, to look at the progressive education model from all sides: not just its history, its academic research, its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, and its pedagogy, but also its outcomes with my own children and their schoolmates.

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Progressive education is not a ew reform. As a philosophy of how schools should teach, it started in the early 20th century as a response to the traditional way of teaching kids, which was very

Another View of Whole Language

The term "whole language" was coined to reflect a curriculum that included strategies that looked at whole words, not just discrete letter sounds. Please note that I wrote "*not just* letter sounds." I did not write "*in place of* letter sounds." Using visual and contextual clues, and sounding out words are all important reading skills. Comprehension strategies that go beyond word recognition are also crucial. As the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English note in their standards students need to "apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts. They draw on prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g. sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics)."

Efforts to frame the problem of public schools as progressive vs. traditional, such as Rob Kremer's article in this issue of *Oregon's Future,* ignore the most important factor in creating good public schools: the knowledge and capacity of the teacher in the classroom. Schools, including those based on the Coalition of Essential Schools principles which Kremer criticizes in his article, are affected by the teacher's ability in an individual classroom to draw on the practices and research in his or her day-to-day efforts for connecting students with learning. A substantial body of research confirms that the single biggest obstacle to maintaining progressive reforms is the extensive skills needed by teachers to teach both subjects and students well.

Kimberly Cambell

(This sidebar is an excerpt from Kimberly's article "One Teacher's Journey: A Response to Rob Kremer." Please also see Joanne Yatvins's article—Ed)

structured, dry, and authoritarian. Developed by John Dewey, progressivism shuns teacher-directed curriculum standards in favor of open-ended projects and hands-on activities. From the start, progressive education was at least in part a political movement. It sought to use the schools to "build a new social order," as one of its early leaders, George Counts, advocated. As such, its adherents believed the schools should instill in students "democratic behaviors" and "humanistic values."

In the latter half of the 20th century, elements of progressivism became the dominant pedagogy in public schools. Some people argue that progressive education ended as the prevailing orthodoxy in public schools after World War II. To the extent that progressivism is no longer a social movement, this is true, but what has survived is the philosophical belief that schools should be "child-centered." That is, schools should not directly teach a pre-defined canon of academic knowledge and skills to students, but rather, students should be taught through projects and activities, carefully guided by a trained teacher in an ongoing process of discovery.

All of the professional teachers' organizations, which determine curriculum standards, accept this idea as self-evident fact. "Within the educational community," says the noted critic of progressivism, E.D. Hirsch, "there is no thinkable alternative."

As the modern form of progressivism grew to dominate the public education landscape, a body of teaching beliefs and practices emerged, and to some extent became codified, in the form of the various "standards" documents put out by the professional teaching organizations. I saw the impact of these beliefs in my own kids' classrooms.

My first uneasy feeling at Riverdale came when I attended the parent night in my son's first grade class. Written in big letters across the blackboard were the words: "We are a whole language classroom." Whole language is progressive education's belief system applied to reading. Its theorists believe learning to read is as natural as learning to speak, and therefore it isn't necessary (and indeed it could be harmful) to directly and systematically teach and drill children on the sound-letter relationships, called phonemes.

They believe learning to read is primarily an exercise in recognizing whole words, as if the English language was written in pictograms, like Chinese. Phonics proponents, on the other hand, systematically teach students to recognize and say the several dozen phonemes, and then have them practice combining them into words.

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Both my kids were reading before they entered school, so at the time my wife and I were not too concerned with Riverdale's approach to reading instruction, one way or the other. Then, I got my son's first grade Reading Report Card. It had a list of "reading strategies," and a check mark which indicated how effectively he used each of them. Among the reading strategies: "Skips words," "Substitutes words," "Uses visual cues," and "Uses contextual cues." I found out that this is right out of the whole language playbook. Instead of trying to sound out phonemes of words they do not recognize, students are taught to just skip the word, put another in its place, look at the pictures and guess a word that might work, or base a guess on the text up to that point. *(See Joanne Yatvin's article for*

another description of whole language—Ed)

This seemed wrong, even ridiculous to me. But there it was—an official report card from Riverdale. Reading by substituting words? It see med as if Lewis Carroll had taken over the literacy program at Riverdale. While our kids weren't particularly affected by the flaws in the reading program at Riverdale, this was not so with math.

The same basic controversy between phonics and whole language exists in the teaching of mathematics. It was so heated that Clinton's Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, once called for a truce in the "math war." Progressive educators believe that mastery of basic math skills and knowledge springs from conceptual understanding. The traditionalists believe it is the other way around. It turns out these differing theories result in dramatically different practices in the classroom.

The progressive approach was articulated in 1989, when the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) came out with their "Curriculum and Evaluation Standards." NCTM was a response to the back-to-basics movement of the 1970s, which itself was a backlash to the progressive New Math reforms of the 1960s. The methods promoted by these standards are still the focal point for intense controversy because they've essentially become the law of the land, as almost all the states have used them to create their own standards, which then guide the teaching of math.

The NCTM standards document openly disdains "paper and pencil practice" of basic arithmetic computational skills, and it demands that calculators be used even in kindergarten. It emphasizes how math should be taught (through hands-on activities and problem solving rather than teacher-led instruction and practice) and says almost nothing about the specific math skills students should master at each level.

One of the basic tenets of progressivism implies that repetitive practice of math skills harms a child's intellect. Therefore practitioners openly disdain things such as worksheets and memorization of multiplication tables. Their belief is that open-ended problems intended to elicit greater understanding of the underlying math concepts are a more effective (and more enjoyable) route to computational proficiency.

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If this were true, it would be great, but it flies in the face of common sense. Kids' minds at the early elementary ages are fully in the concrete domain, not the abstract domain. They are not equipped to easily understand abstract concepts. If they practice adding single digit numbers, they will not only learn the math facts, but they will understand the concept of addition. The progressive theory says such repetitive practice is harmful, and it is better to teach them the concept of "addition," and they will then easily master the math facts.

This notion that young kids should not be submitted to repetitive practice seems silly. Young brains are predisposed to repeating everything they hear. Five year olds love to sing the same ditty time and again. Parents know the young mind loves repetition, yet at precisely this time the progressive viewpoint refuses to take advantage of this desire to help kids learn basic math.

At Riverdale, the teachers refused to use drill and practice as a way to teach addition, subtraction, and multiplication. Rather, they used "manipulatives" – little blocks representing units of ones and tens which they would rearrange and substitute to figure out concepts such as place value, and borrowing or carrying.

I saw my daughter's growing confusion about math, and time and again went to her teachers to talk about how they might change their instruction so she would understand. I talked to them about the research, and they responded by explaining constructivism. Constructivism is a theory about how the brain builds understanding, which basically concludes that drill and practice and scripted lessons result in a superficial understanding of subjects. By this time I knew that constructivism was just the latest in the long list of names for progressivism. I knew that their theories were not based on empirical data proving actual effectiveness.

The Logic of a Scripted Approach to Teaching Math

I once had the opportunity to ask a PhD candidate from Stanford, who was the featured speaker of the Math Department at Ohio State University, how she felt about scripted math programs. She had made the point that math teachers in the US were deficient in their knowledge of math, so it occurred to me that she might like math programs that "helped" the teachers by providing scripts. She said that these programs were OK, but their major problem was that they stunted the teacher's ability to be creative. Yes, that is actually what she said. There was a big audience, so I did not get a chance to pose another question, but the next ones were: 1. Is the teaching of math about teacher creativity, or student learning? And 2. If teachers are deficient in the knowledge of math, why would you want them to have such leeway?

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I also knew that theories were not going to teach my daughter math facts – only simple basic instruction was going to do that.

The turning point came on the day we got a note from my daughter's third grade teacher, which had gone out to all the parents. It had a package of flash cards, and asked us to practice with the flash cards ten minutes a day with our kids so they would learn their single digit math facts. The letter stressed how essential it was for the kids to master these facts. "We will not do this in school," the note said. "Instead, we will play many math games with your child to reinforce what you are doing at home."

This seemed completely backwards. If it is so important that the kids learn it, why not do it at school? Wouldn't it be better if the school did the teaching and the games were played at home? It wasn't too long after this we decided that if it was going to be up to us to teach our kids, it made no sense to have them wasting their weekdays playing games. We removed our children from Riverdale, and home schooled them for the rest of the year.

If we hadn't taken our daughter out of Riverdale when we did and taught her ourselves, I'm certain she would be failing math now, in high school. As it is, she has to work very hard to understand algebra, and she constantly makes errors in symbol manipulation, which is basically the arithmetic of algebra.

It would be easy to dismiss this story as just one family's bad experience. Maybe the progressive methods were just a bad fit with our children. But the overwhelming body of empirical research is basically an indictment of the progressive education model. And it's not just recent research—educators have had

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experimental research evidence for decades that unequivocally conclude that current progressive theories don't work—evidence that large numbers of educators have chosen to ignore.

Almost forty years ago the US government started the largest and most expensive educational research project ever conducted, called Project Follow Through. The idea was to compare nine different elementary teaching methods over extended periods of time, to see which ones were effective at raising academic achievement in reading and math.

Seven of the nine methods chosen for the study were squarely of the progressive design. Roughly 80,000 students took part in the research. For each cohort of students in any given model, there was a control group against which their results were measured. The data gathering phase lasted almost a decade. The researchers collected achievement data on basic skills in math and reading, but also assessed student self esteem and conceptual understanding. In the late 1970s, the results were published.

The seven progressive methods brought up the rear. On most measures, they actually performed worse than their control groups. One model called Direct Instruction was the only one to have strongly positive effects in all three categories of measurement. Direct Instruction, as the name implies, completely rejects the progressive way of doing things. Its practices fly in the face of the prevailing orthodoxy, yet it had far and away the best results in the Project Follow Through research, not just on the basic skills measures, but also on the self esteem and cognitive measures where progressive educators claim they have the advantage.

Follow Through has huge implications for the biggest challenges facing public schools today, but the results have been ignored and even buried by people in the education establishment, because the results do not validate their dearly held theories. Follow Through specifically targeted low income students, and asked the question: which education method most effectively raises achievement? The answer was unequivocal – progressive education methods were inferior, especially with low income students.

Affluent families will generally make up for what the progressive school refuses to do. But how about the inner city where the demographic is much different?

Yet in the nearly thirty years since, the education establishment has stubbornly insisted that the progressive model is the only way to go, and meanwhile they seem mystified at why they have not made much progress in narrowing the achievement gap. This is true not only here but also abroad. Bonnie Grossen, an education researcher from the University of Oregon, wrote: "Extensive case studies in England indicated that progressive education was in reality radically conservative; children became more firmly entrenched in the social class they inherited from their parents."

It's easy to see why this is so. If schools routinely rely upon parents to teach their kids the basics as Riverdale does, children from less educated families will tend to fall behind. Riverdale can get away with it and not appear to fail, since the affluent families will generally make up for what the school refuses to do. But how about the inner city where the demographic is much different?

Take the Portland School District, for instance. In 1999, Portland adopted a new middle school math curriculum, Connected Math, which is fully in the progressive camp. After four years, almost 70 percent of black eighth graders are still "below standard" in math.

As a parent, I saw the effect of progressivism on the education of my own children, and found it harmful. As an education professional, I had the opportunity to investigate its basis in research,

and found it wanting. As a citizen, I see that our education establishment has wholeheartedly embraced a philosophy of teaching that fails to live up to its claims, and then stubbornly clings to it in the face of overwhelming evidence that it simply is not effective. Indeed, a strong case can be made that progressivism is one of the primary causes of the achievement gap – perhaps the single biggest problem in schools today.

It took me a long time to admit this. After all, I had a pretty big dog in the fight, buying and remodeling a house just to be in the Riverdale School District, and taking a job to advance the progressive education cause. The truth is that what Riverdale was doing wasn't really all that different from most other school districts. In fact, their test score results were quite high, since they had a very high socioeconomic demographic, and the parents routinely made up for the failures of the school by paying for private tutors, something most parents cannot afford.

My goal is not to expose Riverdale, but rather to tell my story so that other parents will not be drawn in by the alluring rhetoric of the progressive model as I was. Parents are at a disadvantage discussing education with educators. They are the experts, and we tend to give them great deference. Well, I was one parent – one consumer – who became an expert. I had the time and opportunity to investigate their claims and decipher the jargon. I spoke with hundreds of progressive minded educators at all levels and asked them to respond to the evidence I had found. They could not. I read hundreds of journal articles and research reports to see if they had evidence of the progressive model's effectiveness. They did not. I watched to see if their methods could teach math to my perfectly intelligent daughter. They could not.

I hope other parents will learn from my painful experience: progressive education principles and methods sound good, but don't work.

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One Teacher's Journey

A Response to Rob Kremer

by Kimberly Campbell

My Journey

I entered my first teaching job in 1979 with the belief that I could create a classroom in which junior high students would work with me to discover their own voices as writers, and continue to explore or discover their passion for reading. I anticipated that the district would provide me with guidelines as part of a K-12 curriculum framework to ensure students were meeting district as well as state expectations, and that I would be provided with resources in support of the curriculum.

The reality of my first teaching experience was nothing like I envisioned. I was inundated with district curriculum guidelines and resources. For example, I was required to implement a spelling program. This program used pre-tests to group the students by skill level, then each level received a weekly pre-test on a list of words provided by the program and a weekly post-test on the same list. Students monitored their test scores on a chart. Every Monday I administered three different spelling tests for the three levels within my 7th grade Language Arts class. Every Friday I administered three weekly post-tests. We dutifully noted scores. But I began to notice that despite students' weekly test scores, which in general were good—a passing rate of eighty percent or higher—students' spelling in written work was not showing improvement. In fact, students who spelled words correctly on the Friday tests misspelled those very same words in their writing. I raised this issue with my colleagues, but was told that the spelling program had

been carefully researched and they had documentation showing that it resulted in improved spelling. Indeed, this was true in my classroom. My students' test scores showed that their spelling improved based on weekly pre and post-tests. However, their ability to apply what they learned from those tests to their written work was not part of the data being collected.

The spelling requirement was just one example. I also administered a writing program, known as *Cut the Deck*, which focused on writing through a series of sentence-combining formulas. Over the course of a year, I observed that most students could follow the sentence-combining patterns, but their writing lacked content focus, and any sense of voice—their personality and unique style as writers—was completely absent. As I had observed in the spelling exercises, students did not apply what they learned about sentence-combining to any other writing they did.

Most troubling to me was the requirement that students demonstrate mastery of sentence diagramming—not just that they could identify parts of speech and knew how they functioned in a sentence, but that they were tested on their ability to diagram those parts of speech. One of my students, an 8th grade girl in Honors English, could not grasp the diagramming formula. She could correctly identify the parts of speech when I asked her to label them, but when it came time to move words into the lines and angles of the diagram, she became confused. Repeatedly, she failed the diagramming test, but this same student's writing was excellent, both in content and demonstration of conventions. I could not see the correlation between her ability to diagram and her ability to use language to convey meaning.

I have no doubt that the administrators who required me to implement this curriculum believed they were making good choices for students. Their decisions were bolstered by the data we were collecting in our own classrooms, data that showed students' scores on the tests were improving (with the exception of some sentence-diagramming tests). Unfortunately, this quantitative data didn't tell the whole story. My data showed students could spell once a week on Friday and combine sentences when given a formula to follow. But my students were not readers or writers; they could not transfer the skills from their tests to work of their own. More importantly, I found I had very little time to write and read with my students beyond the implementation of curriculum mandates. Other than journal writing, which students did at home, and an occasional short story—which I tracked down and copied on my own, my language arts classroom was a place where isolated skills were the focus.

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My attempts to voice my observations and concerns were met with resistance. It became clear to me that what I saw and heard as a teacher was not important. My job was to deliver the curriculum; the qualitative data I had collected was not considered. It was also clear that the students' strengths, challenges, and interests were not supposed to be my concern. Outcomes were the goal and this included improving scores—which was easy to do. After three years, I left the profession in frustration.

My story is not the exception; current statistics show that 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within three years and the numbers are even higher for teachers in urban settings. A closer look at these statistics shows that many teachers are leaving the profession because they feel trapped by mandated curriculum practices, isolated from collegial support, and frustrated by what they describe as a growing gap between classroom teachers' knowledge based on experience and state and federal prescriptions regarding classroom practice.

Although the number of teachers leaving the profession is growing at an alarming rate, the reasons for leaving the profession are not new. One hundred years ago, a number of educators, including John Dewey, began to take a close look at schools. Dewey discovered and championed a view of education in which children were recognized as social beings who bring experiences, interests, and capacities to the work of learning. He supported a classroom in which learning would build on children's interests and experiences. He was not a proponent of letting children "do their own thing." Quite the contrary, Dewey called on schools, particularly teachers, to immerse themselves in the needs of their students, curriculum development, and their own practice as teachers. Dewey believed teachers were capable of rising above the "mediocre proficiency" that dominated schools of his time. He called for classrooms where students were actively engaged in learning, not passively absorbing material. He called for classrooms in which the teacher drew on his or her knowledge of how children learn, as well as deep knowledge of the discipline and the observations he or she made while working with individual children. His purpose was to connect the skills children learned to the world beyond the classroom.

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One hundred years later, the graduate students with whom I work often ask me why they do not see evidence of Dewey's vision for education in the schools in which they are doing their student teaching; schools that

represent a cross-section of public schools from across the Portland area. The problem with our current public education system is not its effort to implement Dewey's vision of progressive education. The problem is that what we have implemented in the name of progressive education is neither truly progressive nor educational. Despite the opinion of those who believe that his theories have dominated public education for a century, I would be hard pressed to name a public school in the Portland metropolitan area that emulates Dewey's vision.

This is not because Portland-area educators have not tried to do so. My own experience—as founding principal of a high school that was based on the progressive principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools—highlighted for me the challenge of first finding and then supporting energized and skilled teachers capable of engaging students in active learning.

This inquiry-based approach to learning is designed to deepen students' understanding of complex ideas—it is not passive learning based on the teacher's transmission of knowledge. I also met with resistance from parents, as illustrated by the following quote uttered by a parent whose child attended a local high school, "I don't want my kid to be a critical thinker; you already have him asking too many questions. Teach him what he needs to pass the tests and get into a good college; that's your job." *(Please see the glossary for a definition of CES—Ed)*

The Current Dilemma

It is tempting to frame the solution to public schools as one of curriculum; we should just tell the teachers how to teach. Much effort has been devoted to this very task. The debate about "whole language" and scripted reading programs is a great example. Whole language is not a packaged curriculum; it is not a mandate from the National Council of Teachers of English; it is not anti-phonics. It does not have a playbook. Whole language came out of research conducted by teachers and university professors on how children learn language. Emig's *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, published in 1971, marks an early milestone in research on how students develop literacy skills. Glenda Bissex's *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Read and Write* (1980) followed, as did research by Donald Graves and his University of New Hampshire colleagues.

This research drew on qualitative methodology—observation, interview, and close examination of students' reading and writing—rather than quantitative research, which focuses on framing a hypothesis and then creating an experiment to test the hypothesis. Both forms of research have value, but comparing studies within the two types of research is problematic.

Qualitative research in a teacher's classroom, conducted by the teachers as well as university researchers, found that there were a number of strategies children used in support of literacy learning. (See Pearson et. al. (1992) for a synthesis of research on characteristics of proficient readers.) This research contradicts many of the reading curriculum programs on the market, which approach reading as a series of discrete skills with a particular emphasis on letter sounds.

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Efforts to frame the problem of public schools as progressive vs. traditional, such as Rob Kremer's article in this issue of *Oregon's Future*, ignore the most important factor in creating good public schools: the knowledge and capacity of the teacher in the classroom. Schools, including schools based on the Coalition of Essential Schools principles that Kremer criticizes in his article, are impacted by the teacher's ability in an individual classroom to draw on the practices and research in his or her day-to-day efforts to connect students with learning. A substantial body of research confirms that the single biggest obstacle to maintaining progressive reforms is the extensive skills needed by teachers to teach both subjects and students well.

What about claims that empirical research shows that progressive education doesn't work? It would be easy to get into a battle of research findings. I urge all of us to be thoughtful consumers of research. When looking at large scale studies that compare teaching methodologies in various classrooms, we need to keep in mind that comparing the results of one group of children to another group of children is problematic because no two children are alike—for that matter, no two teachers are alike. This is not to say that these studies should be ignored, but that they should be read critically. With this in mind, I can offer a number of studies that show intellectually challenging curricula and inquiry-oriented teaching produce noticeable learning gains for students.

Ralph Tyler's *Eight Year Study* in the 1930s documented how students from progressive schools were more academically successful, as well as more practically resourceful and socially responsible, than matched

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samples of 1,475 peers from traditional schools. Qualitative research on progressive education efforts since then demonstrate similar findings, particularly with respect to critical thinking, problem-solving, and students' ability to express themselves orally and in writing. (For reviews of this research see Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Glass et. al., 1977; Good & Brophy, 1986; Horwitz, 1979; Peterson, 1979.)

Early reform efforts, as well as more recent attempts, have failed due to a number of factors, but one reason is cited most frequently by researchers who have studied reform efforts: the kind of teaching called for in progressive education requires teachers to do their work differently than most of them experienced as students themselves and/or experienced in their teacher preparation programs. Without preparation and support to implement the kind of teaching and inquiry practices necessary to sustain the progressive reform, teachers fall back on what they know: reliance on textbooks and teacher guides, lecture-recitation methods, and an emphasis on facts and skills rather than application and connection to students' experiences and interests. In 1965 Lawrence Cremin noted, "progressive education... demanded infinitely skilled teachers and it failed because such teachers could not be recruited in sufficient numbers."

Studies of whole language instruction are illustrative. A number of studies, beginning in the late 1980s, have found that a whole language approach to teaching reading resulted in increased reading scores. For example, a 1989 study conducted by Reutzel and Cooter concluded that after a year of instruction which included multiple strategies during reading instruction and time in class for students to write, first graders did better on reading tests than their counterparts who had spent the year with skill lessons and worksheets. Although many of these studies are small in scale, focusing on just a few classrooms, a large study in Utah, which focused on 1,149 children in fifty classrooms, found that "the use of children's literature to teach children to read had a positive effect upon students' achievement and attitudes toward reading—much greater than the traditional methods." By traditional methods, they were referring to reading instruction that focused on worksheets emphasizing isolated letters, words, and phrases, rather than learning letter sound relationships in the context of trying to understand the meaning of a story. *(Please see editor's note below —Ed)*

What Can We Do?

It can be frustrating to try to make sense of all the research studies and summaries of research studies that are thrown our way. I approach education research as I do nutrition research—viewing research studies as interesting information, but not the only authority on any topic. I have also learned to look closely at the connections between the researcher and the research. For example, many of the studies on current reading programs are written by the very people who create and market the program.

When considering research, I also try to be thoughtful about my response to individual parent stories regarding a particular teacher or school. These stories need to be heard and examined; we can learn from them. But one parent's story is just that, one story—and this how I view Rob Kremer's story as expressed in his article in this issue of *Oregon's Future*. It is not the story for all children, or for all schools.

So what can parents do when it comes time to select a school for their child, or to ask questions about the school their child is currently attending? First, educate yourself. If you want to know more about current school practices and the impact of standards, I recommend Alfie Kohn's, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. If you are interested in The Coalition of Essential Schools, check out their web site at www.essentialschools.org or read *The Power of Their Ideas* by Deborah Meier, former principal of Central Park East Secondary School. If you want to learn more about literacy instruction and addressing concerns about the achievement gap, read *Literacy with an Attitude* by Patrick Finn. If you want to know what the National Council of Mathematics and the National Council of Teachers of English say about standards, check out their web sites. If you are unfamiliar with the standards expected of Oregon schools, the Oregon Department of Education web site is available. Don't let me or anyone else tell you what these folks say, check it out for yourself.

As a parent, what I want for my own children (one is now in middle school and one is in high school) is a teacher who takes the time to know my child as an individual, to understand how he or she learns, and to become familiar with his or her interests. I want a teacher who knows his or her subject area (or areas) well—big picture concepts as well as the skills that support big picture concepts. I also want a teacher who is passionate about the subject and shares his or her own work in the subject area. I want a teacher who observes what my child knows and still needs to know and is willing to speak with me about my child's learning with insight. I want a teacher who draws on a wealth of strategies and methods to support my child's learning, knowing that one program does not have all the answers.

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I am well aware that creating an educational system in which all children get the support they need to learn is no easy task. We will need to ask hard questions of teachers and administrators, we will need administrators and teacher educators to counsel some folks out of the profession, and finally we will need to work together to create challenging

classrooms that engage students in rigorous learning—and we should expect students to demonstrate core skills and knowledge. We need to ask schools to provide evidence of student learning—based on a variety of measures, including state and national standards, but also based on assessment data collected and analyzed by the local school community.

We have our work cut out for us. Still, I am encouraged by the opportunities I have had to witness teachers, those who are new to the profession as well as veterans, who believe that their professional responsibility is to examine their classroom practice and curricula, to challenge their thinking about school, to broaden their repertoire of teaching techniques, strategies, and structures, and to document how their efforts engage and support students as learners.

Editor's note: Notice that Rob Kremer in his article describes traditional teaching methods the same way Kimberly Campbell does—as outdated and misunderstanding how children learn—but neither of these authors agree on the solution, and each tends to perceive the other's thinking as traditional, and therefore, the root of the problem.

A list of books that might add dimension to the reading list Kimberly provides includes "No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning" by Abigail and Stephan Thenstrom, "The Myth of the First Three Years" by John T. Bruer, "Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms" by Diane Ravitch, "Research on Educational Innovations" by Arthur K. Ellis, and "Popular Education and its Discontents" by Lawrence A. Cremin. —Jay Hutchins

Kimberly Campbell is an assistant professor of education at Lewis & Clark College. She works with graduate students who are learning to be teachers, as well as teachers who work in K-12 classrooms. Kimberly's research and teaching focus on teacher knowledge, teachers as researchers, and evaluating the best practices in the teaching of reading and writing. She has published articles based on the research she conducted during her twelve years of teaching language arts at the high school and junior high school level, and published more recent work related to supporting beginning teachers. She is currently at work on a book about strategies for teaching literature in diverse high school classrooms. Kimberly also had the opportunity to serve as founding principal of a high school based on the Coalition of Essential Schools principles.

A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

By Barbara Ruben, EdD, Guest Forum Editor

In his article *Reading First =Kids First* in this issue of *Oregon's Future*, Siegfried Engelmann gives a convincing argument for the exclusive use in schools of the federally endorsed Reading First curricula. He argues that his research and others prove that Direct Instruction is the most effective way to teach young people to read, particularly children of poverty who come into the school system without early exposure to print. These students also arrive in kindergarten and first grade without a mainstream vocabulary. In her article, "*O Brave New World*," Joanne Yatvin makes a strong case that reading instruction for under-prepared children should be integrated into natural language and rich literature instead of taught solely through isolated skill sessions.

In order to increase the scope of the *Oregon's Future* Education Forum, I decided to find out what a practitioner currently in the schools has to say about teaching kids to read. Chief Joseph Elementary is a poverty level school. I believe what I found at Chief Joseph will give readers a sense of the complexity involved in teaching all kids to read — including beginning readers who encounter individual obstacles to fluency and comprehension.

Kathy Jaffe is the principal of Chief Joseph Elementary, a Title I School that is meeting state standards using an interesting mix of approaches to teach reading. I asked Ms. Jaffe how teachers at Chief Joseph were able to get so many poverty level kids reading at grade level. She explained, "We are determined to make sure everyone can read. We use an eclectic approach. We tailor a program that works for each kid." Chief Joseph is not a Reading First school. This means the school is not obligated to use specific programs on the list of federally approved curricula, but also does

How One School Keeps Kids from Slipping Through the Cracks

not receive the extra funds for being a Reading First school. Although most of the programs the staff currently uses are on the Reading First list, this gives the principal and staff more flexibility in curricula decisions.

As a poverty level school, Chief Joseph is entitled to Title I money. They primarily use their Title I money for extra faculty and what is left goes into materials. Six years ago, the whole staff was trained through a state grant in CORE, a program that exposed the staff to all the best research in reading instructional strategies. This was an ongoing training over the course of an entire school year.

It was amazing to hear the array of resources the school uses to make sure all kids learn to read. For example, the whole school has a rotating two hour literacy block that utilizes all the specialists in the school, enabling the students to be divided into small instructional groups at the students' instructional level where they can focus intensely on the specific reading skills each individual needs. Ms. Jaffe described the various programs at each of the grade levels:

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> "We totally buy into explicit phonetic awareness in kindergarten through 3rd grade. At kindergarten we use *Readwell*. We were using *Open Court* but found it was not intense enough direct instruction in phonemic awareness. However, in 1st grade, the core of our program is still *Open Court*. The first hour of the first grade reading block is leveled and the second hour, for most kids, is a "readers workshop" where students have more choices and a literature-rich experience.
>
> Struggling 1st grade readers spend the second hour with *Reading Mastery*, a highly structured skill-based program. We are determined to have all first graders at grade level by the end of first grade. The most important thing for them is to read. In 2-3rd grades the backbone of the program is still *Open Court*, but it is supplemented with novel study during the readers workshop hour."

In addition, Ms. Jaffe has secured private foundation money to run two intense one-on-one tutoring programs servicing about 32 students who were not responding to the regular curriculum. One of the special tutoring programs, the *Lindamood-Bell* method, uses two trained clinicians working one-on-one with fourteen 1-5th grade kids for 45 minutes day, five days a week. This is an innovative program that uses visual imagery and has had remarkable success around the nation for kids who do not respond to a phonetic approach to reading.

Twenty students are receiving Orton-Gillingham tutoring. This is a very structured one-on-one phonics approach, which has been very successful with many students who struggle with reading. In addition, about 40 students get pulled out to read with SMART volunteers.

After lunch the 4-5th graders return to their homeroom classes to read aloud, then move into a 2-hour leveled reading block for the whole afternoon. The two lowest groups receive very structured training in a program called *Corrective Reading*, in which skills are broken down and "they go for it" to make sure they are reading at grade level by the end of the year. The rest of the kids read literature through the *Open Court* curriculum. They also use a program called Rewards, which works with reading multi-syllable words, a program that Ms. Jaffe says the students really love. In addition, they use something called *The Day Book*, which teaches small snippets of skills in a consumable workbook. Ms. Jaffe explained, "Our kids just need more explicit instruction." As if there aren't enough different programs, the 2-5th grades also use a fluency building program, *Read Naturally*, two days a week. This program involves the students in reading a one-page selection of nonfiction first "cold" (meaning without practice). Then they have a timed read, listen to a tape of the book, and finally, read the same book again aloud, "hot" (after practice). The premise of this program is that more fluent readers will get more comprehension out of their reading. Finally, two times a week students can participate in a free after-school reading club.

I asked Ms. Jaffe how the staff determines the group each student needs to be placed in, and how she decides which special program or service should be used with a student. She explained that they conduct frequent ongoing assessments. Students are tested every two to four weeks using *DIBELS*, an assessment that checks for phonetic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Teachers also use *Direct Reading Assessment* (DRA). DRA tests students by having them read aloud while the teacher listens for "miscues." These miscues determine which reading strategies the child has not mastered. Ms. Jaffe pointed out, "We are incorporating new

resources as they come. Our population is quite stable so we can work over time with the students and really meet their specific needs." An important key is having teachers work together on a routine basis. Teachers meet by grade level once a month for literacy planning. The Title I Coordinator facilitates the meetings, and teachers get a chance to talk abut individual students needs and reconfigure groups accordingly.

Because reading is a complex, uniquely human endeavor, and no size fits all, many students need explicit specialized instruction.

Additionally, they use a roving substitute teacher for grades 1-3, so teachers can meet for monthly joint planning. At the 4-5th grade level teachers are paid to meet after school to strategize best practices. Because reading is a complex, uniquely human endeavor, and no size fits all, many students need explicit specialized instruction. A complex reading program such as Chief Joseph's with many different components takes ongoing professional coordination among the teachers. The staff at Chief Joseph makes sure students don't slip through the cracks.

Editor's Notes

Lindamood-Bell

This intervention is designed for students who are weak in something called "concept imagery." According to the Lindamood-Bell website, these students have difficulty with reading comprehension, critical thinking, and may not follow directions well or connect to conversations. Such students are often misdiagnosed with other learning disabilities. The program used at Chief Joseph uses mental imagery and inquiry to increase students' comprehension skills, and is based on research developed by cognitive psychologists.

Core and Open Court

Core is a state run program. Most explanations of Core talk about Teaching Reading is Rocket Science, by Louisa Moats (1999). In her book, she explains that teaching reading is far more complex than most professionals and laypersons realize — that phonologic, alphabetic, semantic, and syntactic systems of written language require a careful schedule and a sequence of objectives — and that reading programs need to use explicit strategies to support students' first learning experience. This, she explains, allows the reader to transfer knowledge and skills to other contexts. Her point is that this is too important to leave to the judgment of individual teachers. So Core enables educators at a given school to choose an appropriate core reading program. Moat's argument is that the better the core program addresses instructional priorities, the less teachers will need to supplement and modify instruction for the majority of learners. These ideas are points on which people like Siegfried Engelmann from the University of Oregon base their arguments against multiple approaches. The core reading program at Chief Joseph is Open Court.

Open Court is the only program on the Reading First list that uses components of authentic children's literature. Direct Instruction purists believe it is too loose and its introduction of irregular verbs confuses students unnecessarily. Progressive educators prefer it for students who read more naturally than many underachieving students

Jay Hutchins

A Slightly Alternative View:
Advice from Siegfried Engelmann

[In teaching] both the starting point and the amount of practice are determined not by applying formulas that have nothing do with performance, but by letting the children show you, through actual behavior, what they know and how much practice they require to learn it. The most important rule for anyone who wants to become a superior teacher — one who is able to teach virtually any learner with an IQ of 70 or more — is to reference everything that is taught to the performance of the learner. This rule holds not only for everything in the Direct Instruction sequences but everything else teachers do. Whether you are teaching learners the rules about how to store the volleyballs and use them during recess, a unit on Sweden, or quadratic equations, find a starting point that permits the learners to perform at least 70 percent correctly on the tasks you present. Then proceed a step at a time, with each step referenced to whether the learners achieve mastery.

Remember, the learner is not segmented to learn one way during structured lessons and learn another way in response to the unit on Sweden. It's the same learner, with the same repertoire, habits, and motivation. Sometimes, teachers fail to learn this truth. Instead of using the same positive management techniques they use during Direct Instruction lessons, they nag and scold children at other times, and basically fail to apply what they have learned through their Direct Instruction training.

Siegfried Engelmann

(From Engelmann's introduction to Introduction to Direct Instruction *by Nancy E. Marchand-Martella, Timothy A. Slocum, and Ronald C. Martella.)*