

Education: What Works

If anything is constant in public education, it is the endless cycle of reform and innovation that in turn generates endless theories and educational jargon. Heated conflicts exist over how to teach everything from reading to algebra. In the past, when our public schools were mostly local affairs, the debate was more localized. Today, state legislatures and even Congress take part in the battles, which can occasionally become the single most important issue in statewide elections.

Parents are usually not interested in the politics of education; they want to know what works! They realize that their children have one opportunity to become an educated person and those inappropriate educational ends or methods will permanently shape their children's lives. Here we will focus on answers to the question, "What works in education?" Some of the answers will come from a compilation of research done by the Department of Education under William Bennett in the 1980's.

Education should be about two tasks, building the intellect and instilling virtue. Regarding the intellect, the following words of Jacques Barzun serve us well:

[I]t is intelligence stored up and made into habits of discipline, signs and symbols of meaning, chains of reasoning and spurs to emotions—a shorthand (and a wireless) by which the mind can skip connectives, recognize ability, and communicate truth. Intellect is at once a body of common knowledge and the channels through which the right particle of it can be brought to bear quickly, without the effort of redemonstration, on the matter in hand.[{1}](#)

Many have recognized the fact that parents are the first and most important teachers of their children. Christian parents should seek to begin their children's education as early as

possible. To that end, John Amos Comenius wrote in his work *The Great Didactic* that,

If we want to educate a person in virtue we must polish him at a tender age. And if someone is to advance toward wisdom he must be opened up for it in the first years of his life when his industriousness is still burning, his mind is malleable, and his memory still strong.[{2}](#)

What can parents do? To begin with, the more book-friendly parents can make a home the better. Parents should read to their young children and let their children read to them. Asking in-depth questions about what is being read will boost comprehension skills, vocabulary, and general knowledge. Keep a consistent family routine for meals, bedtime and homework. Both parents should model the importance of a life of the mind. One of the best ways of doing this is to limit mindless entertainment like television. For, in order for our children to become mature handlers of the Word (2 Timothy 2:15), they must become competent readers.

Next we will look at the way parents and teachers can partner together to educate our children.

The Parent Teacher Partnership

It is extremely important that both teacher and parents convey high expectations to students regarding academic performance. Studies have shown that low expectations on the part of teachers can become self-fulfilling prophecies for their students. These students are often seated far from the teacher, receiving less direct instruction and attention. Parents need to work with teachers who have failed to expect good work from their children. This requires frequent communication with the teacher, as well as the student. If a parent perceives that a teacher may have “given up” on their child, a meeting with everyone involved, including a school

counselor, should be called immediately. If the situation is allowed to continue, your child may find himself hopelessly behind.

Sometimes parents demand too much of their children, resulting in anxiety and low self-confidence, but it is far more common for parents not to expect reasonably high standards for their children's academic work.

A corollary to setting high expectations for students is helping them to make a healthy connection between ability and effort. When students are young they equate effort with ability. In other words, if they work hard and do well, they assume that they have a high level of ability. Failure means that they did not try hard enough, something that they can personally overcome on the next assignment. Later, students learn that ability and effort are not the same. Some students need to work much harder at certain things in order to do as well as others. As a result, students might try to mask what they perceive to be low ability by turning in tests early even though they are hastily finished or by choosing not to participate in class discussions. High levels of effort come to represent low ability. As a result many students fail to work to their potential. Believing that they lack ability, they eventually lose hope for academic success.

Underachievement becomes a response to the possibility that they may be low ability students. Teachers and parents must intervene before these patterns become fixed. By setting high standards and insisting on consistent, diligent work, parents and teachers can work together to build confidence that can become the foundation for future effort. In some cases, parents may need to help their children crawl before they can walk. They may have to supervise homework efforts minute by minute until the student begins to see a connection between the work invested and its resulting success.

Some general rules for successful study include: convince your

child not to cram or try to accomplish large amounts of work in one sitting, help them to weigh the importance of an assignment by developing a system of schoolwork triage, and help your student to identify the standards necessary to succeed. Parents and students should work together to find a strategy that yields the best results.

Classroom Environment

The amount of class time spent on instruction has an obvious influence on student achievement. Unfortunately, studies show that in elementary classrooms actual “time on task,” time focused on academic subjects, ranges from 50 percent to 90 percent of a given school day. This is so proportioned because of tasks imposed on the classroom teacher by those outside of the schools. But it can also be an indication of poor classroom management. What does a well-managed classroom look like?

First, class work is carefully planned, including content, presentation time, and instructional activities. Good teachers set and communicate clear expectations to the students so that they know what is required to succeed. They also make sure that content is sequenced so that it builds in a logical and consistent fashion and that students know where they are heading and how to get there.^{3} A good teacher will also check students for comprehension often and give them multiple opportunities to practice what they have learned. This common sense approach to classroom management is called direct instruction, and research indicates that it has been found to help young and disadvantaged students learn basic skills and older, higher ability students to tackle more complex material.^{4}

Since the more time that is focused on a topic naturally results in greater learning, the way that a teacher utilizes homework is also important. Research shows that although homework is beneficial for all students, it is even more

significant for those with low and medium abilities. In fact, average students who do three to five hours of homework a week, begin to receive grades equal to those of high-ability students who do no homework at all.[{5}](#) It has been found that Japanese students spend about twice as much time studying outside of school as American students.[{6}](#)

However, not every type of homework is helpful. All of us can remember doing homework that seemed like an afterthought. Homework needs to be well planned to be effective. It should relate directly to what is happening in the classroom and be treated as an integral part of instruction by the teacher. This means that teachers should take time to evaluate the assignments and count the grade. Assignments should be analytical rather than standard work sheets, and they should encourage students to think more deeply about the material. Homework encourages students to follow directions, to make comparisons, to raise questions, and to develop responsibility and self-discipline.[{7}](#)

Student assessment is another key factor to effective schooling. Teachers should evaluate students often in order to detect if the material is being covered too quickly or too slowly. Assessment should be done often and by various means. Teachers should use essays, tests, homework, quizzes (both verbal and written), as well as group projects to measure student progress. Students benefit from immediate feedback so that they can correct ineffective study habits or arrange for special tutoring

Teaching Methods

You wouldn't think that how we teach children to read would be very controversial. It is! The ongoing battle between whole-language advocates and those who recommend systematic, structured phonics instruction is a heated and often strident one. The two methods stand on very different theoretical foundations and thus emphasize different activities for

children. Both use phonics and both advocate early, intensive reading by children. But whole-language promoters argue that learning to read and write are natural skills that can be acquired as easily as learning to talk. Just immerse children in words and good books, and they will eventually make sense of it all. Phonics advocates argue that reading is not a natural skill, and that children need intensive and comprehensive phonics training to succeed. They add that a high level of illiteracy, even in the U.S. where the written word is universally found, refutes the notion that language skill acquisition is automatic.

Jeanne Chall, long time professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education argued that research has established that reading is essentially a phonemic activity; children must know the relationship between sounds and letters. If children have not mastered this basic information, they cannot learn to read. Research has also demonstrated that teaching phonics benefits all children, particularly those who are at risk. Focusing on phonics does not deaden a child's desire to read, in fact, whole language is hurting children by not providing them with the tools necessary to read.[\[8\]](#) Although whole language advocates argue that invented spelling, which calls upon students to apply phonics knowledge, actually forces students to think more deeply about phonics, others are not convinced of its effectiveness.

Our question is, "What really works?" Research by Steven A. Stahl and Patricia Miller concluded, "We have no evidence showing that whole language programs produce effects that are stronger than existing basal programs, and potentially may produce lower effects."[\[9\]](#) Even stalwarts of whole language are moving towards a more comprehensive phonics curriculum.

Similar arguments have arisen over the use of calculators in early math instruction. Although many math teachers advocate early classroom use, the public is not so sure. One survey found that 80 percent of math teachers are in favor of early

use, but only 10 percent of the public agrees. Although the final word on early calculator use is still out, research does support the use of manipulatives in teaching young children math. Using objects to represent mathematical values helps students to understand abstract ideas quicker.

Likewise, students learn science best when they are able to do experiments on personal predictions regarding natural phenomenon. Students often reject textbook and lecture material for what they consider to be common sense. Only when they are confronted with actual experimental data do they shed themselves of incorrect assumptions.

Finally let's look at how overall school organization affects learning.

School Organization

Schools benefit greatly from having a strong educational leader, usually the principal, who focuses continually on improving the educational program of the school. This doesn't seem too controversial. Unfortunately, many principals are either not equipped to perform this role or are not expected to. In order to be an educational leader, a principal must have thought carefully and deeply about what it means to be an educated person, and to have developed a clear vision for implementing his or her plan. Some principals haven't had the academic experience to prepare them for this role. Too many have come from a physical education background and coaching duties, which may be a plus when it comes to discipline problems, but not very helpful in constructing an overall vision for academic excellence.

The educational leader should also enjoy a high degree of autonomy in building his or her program. This includes the hiring and firing of teachers and unrestricted communication with parents. Success is often determined by how well parents and teachers can be motivated towards the principal's vision.

Unfortunately, this is much easier to do in private schools than in public ones.

A safe and orderly school environment is necessary for learning to occur. Nevertheless, many schools do not enjoy this basic requirement for success. This problem not only impacts inner city schools, which fight the multiple problems related to poverty and highly bureaucratic administrations. Rural schools can suffer from poor discipline and a lack of consistent policies as well. Realistically, even in generally good schools, a single teacher can diminish the educational experience of his or her class by refusing to, or not even desiring to, maintain order. This is where a strong principal can step in and make a difference.

A teaching staff is most effective when they share high morale, agree that students need grounding in the basics of each subject, and hold students to high standards. Teacher collegiality, the sharing of problems and solutions with one another in a professional atmosphere, is another indication of an effective teaching staff. Unfortunately, many teachers operate without the benefit of peer input. Collegiality seems to occur more often at the elementary school level than in our high schools.

Schools that test their students for the purpose of offering remedial help tend to be more effective, as are those that encourage their students to take more advanced academic courses.

Just knowing what an effective school looks like is only part of the battle for better schools. The challenge is to change poorly performing schools into effective ones. Research shows that effective schools tend to have a much higher degree of autonomy than ineffective ones; something found far more often in private schools than in public schools. Unfortunately, our public school bureaucracy doesn't appear to be moving in the right direction.

Notes

1. Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect*, (Harper & Row: New York, 1959), 4.
2. *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*, U.S. Department of Education, 1986, 6.
3. Ibid., 34.
4. Ibid., 35.
5. Ibid., 41.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 42.
8. "Whole Language in the 90's," *Update, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, Vol 35 #9, 1993.
9. Arthur Ellis & Jeffrey Fouts, *Research on Educational Innovations*, Princeton, NJ: Eye On Education, 46.

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