

Fixing public education: Early childhood learning crucial for student success ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Without being too smug, I have the answer to the success (or failure) of public education. Please bear with me. Our school district, like many school districts, prepares earnestly for the dreaded PSSA tests. Our school district, like many school districts, continues to score low. After each notification of our PSSA disappointing results, heart-wrenching reflection occurs with our teachers, our parents, our administrators. What happened? What interventions in math and reading classes could have been included in our preparations? After looking inward, we next search exterior reasons for our low scores. A frequent explanation being the PSSA tests do not adequately reflect student growth.

Even as a music teacher, I too am engrossed, obsessed, continually perplexed with the gravity of high stakes testing of young children. Even as a music teacher, I too become "certified" to administer the PSSA tests. Months in advanced, even as a music teacher, I too take small groups of children for extra reading support. I sharpen and re-sharpen #2 pencils with an eraser on top. I actively moderate testing sessions by continually walking up and down rows of aisles.

Our principal, to his credit, took a scholarly approach to our problem. This year (2015-16) every faculty member received a copy of John Dewey's *The School and Society/The Child and the Curriculum* (1999, University of Chicago Press). The principal assigned specific chapters as reflection prompts prior to the faculty meeting. Faculty members came prepared to discuss Dewey's philosophy and it's applicability to our school community. The principal encouraged honest and open dialogue. It was refreshing brainstorming strategies with my professional colleagues. But, we still continue to score dismally low on standardized tests. As a teacher, I witness firsthand, our administration, teachers, staff, parents and students giving 110 percent. What's the answer?

In 1996, a different principal requested each of our faculty write a personal philosophy of teaching. When I wrote the essay, I described the beginning of my teaching career in 1978. Now upon re-reading, I was awestruck how the problems in education never changed from 1978 to 1996 to 2016.

In 1978, I taught in a Philadelphia parochial elementary school based on the philosophy of....wait for it....John Dewey! Parts of my essay reads:

There is still the harsh reality of over-crowded classrooms, low reading scores, budget worries, music program cuts resulting in me teaching Religion, Spelling, Reading and even third grade Math. New programs, IPI Math and Open Classroom, (based on the philosophy of John Dewey, a 20th century American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer), were initiated into the system. Instead of Open Classroom, I am learning Responsive Classroom techniques. I am not teaching other subjects like reading or math, but, I am asking children to track the lyrics of song. I am incorporating a vocabulary word wall of music terminology into my classroom. To include the district's math goal, I focus on the inherent logic of note values in music and ask such questions as: 'What is the total when adding four quarter notes, subtracting one half note, multiplying one whole note?' (FYI: the total is eight).

After 30 years in education, experience has shown that many of the problems and solutions are still the same. Why? Perhaps the reason education is still "frozen in time" is because we are looking back at past mistakes while trying not to repeat them in the present. However, that is in fact exactly what we are doing...repeating the same methods over and over with different names and packaging. Instead of running from the past, and stagnating in the present, we must invent educational systems for the future. To accomplish this, it is paramount to note that while the same problems/solutions still exist, one major factor has changed-research into brain development during the first five years of life. This research is exciting and also alarming.

"Recent advances in neuroscience have helped crystallize earlier findings, bringing new clarity and understanding to the field of early childhood brain development. Children are born ready to learn. They cultivate 85 percent of their intellect, personality and skills by age 5. The first months and years of life set the stage for lifelong development. Because of the importance of early brain development, what

happens in the early years has serious implications."

Additionally, the Center on the Developing Child based in Harvard University states: "The science of early brain development can inform investments in early childhood. These basic concepts, established over decades of neuroscience and behavioral research, help illustrate why child development-particularly from birth to 5years-is a foundation for a prosperous and sustainable society."

In creating the schools of tomorrow we need to rethink the learning process. Stop thinking of public schools in terms of kindergarten through 12th grade for 6 ½ hours a day, nine months a year. Stop thinking of public schools in terms of formal, structured, testable, data-driven entities. Start valuing informal, non-structured learning opportunities. Start defining school, education and the learning process as synonyms and be able to use each term interchangeably. We need to ask why a child involved in any type of learning program before the age of 5 is considered to be in "pre-school." There is no such thing as "pre-school," or "pre-learning," or "pre-education." The learning process begins at birth, thus a child's education and opportunity to enter school should begin much earlier than 5 years of age. How early is debatable, but certainly by 3 years of age.

Learning, and thus teaching, looks completely different in a group of 3-year-old children compared to a classroom of 5-year-old students. Yet, a program for 3-year-old children determines the success (or failure) of first-grade students. It is crucial the profound importance of early childhood education not only be recognized in public education, but be incorporated in the system as well.

In a first grade Language Arts class, students need to read passages with accuracy and fluency, make predictions, connect important ideas and link text to previous experiences and knowledge. A typical lesson plan contains objectives, materials, procedures and assessments. If the passage is about growing crops, a student may practice vocabulary words printed on flash cards: plant, seed, soil, moisture, temperature. The student may need to guess what happens to crops when the soil is too dry and then make connections between sunlight and the condition of the soil. These expectations can be overwhelming for a first-grade student unless...you guessed it... the child already experienced growing a garden. An early childhood program could provide this experience: encouraging students to squeeze dirt between his/her fingers, to touch/smell/taste a tomato seed, to over-water or forget to water the plant, to experience the hot sun and learn the word temperature, to laugh and giggle pulling the tomatoes off of the vine, to share tomatoes with other children. An early childhood program has the time to cherish the delights of gardening so that in first grade, the child brings meaning to the printed words plant, seed, soil, moisture, temperature, thus, assuring retention. In first grade, the child remembered forgetting to water the tomato plant and can predict with accuracy what happens to crops when the soil is too dry. In first grade, the student is able to link growing crops to his/her previous gardening adventures. Not having that gardening experience prior to reading about growing crops puts the first-grade child at a serious disadvantage.

Public schools need to establish a realistic set of skills every child needs by the age of 5 before entering a first-grade classroom. Early childhood programs in public schools can provide this service. If children are unable to master these sets of pre-determined skills in the early childhood program, public schools could provide extended school hours, additional weekend classes, consider the possibility of tri- semesters or year-round school. The early childhood program could include extra school nurses, social workers, ELL teachers, interventionists. In other words, "front-load" a child's education as early as possible. Discover any impediments to the child's learning style sooner, rather than later. Enrich a child's background knowledge and aural/oral vocabulary sooner, rather than later. Prepare a child to socially interact with peers through unstructured and structured group activities...yes, sooner than later.

Of course, incorporating early childhood education into the public school model initially will create financial strains on an already limited school budget. I would suggest, however, in the longterm public schools will actually save money. Many children are entering kindergarten lacking in skills necessary to achieve success. Currently, massive sums of money are used in the public system for academic interventions, social programs, and personal care assistants. These programs, though well-intended, are nothing more than "catch up" programs. In an April 2016 posting on Downsizing the Federal Government, author Neal McCluskey, wrote, "Across all federal departments, constant-dollar K-12 spending rose from \$13.5 billion in 1965 to \$80.1 billion in 2014. Despite the large increases in federal aid since the 1960s, public school academic performance has ultimately not improved.

Public school academic performance has not improved because the focus of a child's educational career begins in kindergarten. However, if the public school model began at the age of 2 or 3, the tax dollars used now as later-down-the-road remedies would no longer be needed. Prioritizing early childhood education programs in the public school system is crucial, not only for the success of the child's educational career, but as scientific research has demonstrated, for society-at-large. Based on the current unrest, domestically and globally, early childhood education can't start soon enough.

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Region: United States ^[3]

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