

WHEN NO CURRICULUM IS LEFT BALANCED THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN ARE LEFT BEHIND

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When it comes to curriculum, what do words like "balanced" or "comprehensive" really mean? The balanced approach to education envisions students as whole individuals, who need to make life worth living before they learn to make a living. The days when a one-room schoolhouse, 3Rs curriculum met students' needs are long past. Life in the 21st century will be a decathlon, not a sprint. Curriculum for the 21st century must therefore cultivate a variety of potentials and possibilities that are of long-term value, which enrich students in ways aesthetic and interpersonal as well as financial.

Where do Educators turn for guidance regarding what is "core," to avoid slouching toward curricula limited by their personal biases or circumstances? Given the number of organizations with leadership roles in education that have published lists of core subject areas, what is remarkable is the consistency of those lists. Table 1 presents the exact language from several such lists, in a format that highlights those parallels.

[insert Table 1 – Core Subjects All Students Should Study – about here]

To the contents of these national lists of core subjects, Connecticut's *Common Core of Learning* adds Physical Education/Health and Technology Education.

How Do Schools Lose Their Balance?

Educators already know that schools need to improve, by helping more students learn more deeply about a wider array of content than is currently the case. Educators have been

working toward this end for decades, with a diligence that is too rarely acknowledged, much less honored, by the mass media.

Now, however, is a time when circumstances are separating the Educators from less enlightened or courageous others, to whom we might refer collectively as Path of Least Resistance folk (PLRs). The emphasis on standardized test scores in the 3Rs was, arguably, already excessive prior to the passage of the federal law commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The demands of NCLB force every state, regardless of its past accomplishments and long-standing education reform projects, to adopt expensive and often debatable measures that were originally designed to address chronic problems in certain educationally deficient southern states. Worse yet, this law imposes these pressures without providing the additional resources to deal with these new demands.

It is times like these, as many schools are losing their balance, when Educators of integrity are most important. PLRs are running scared toward a version of schooling that no longer even pretends to provide children with a comprehensive education. The PLR's response to outside pressures is to sacrifice curriculum, to eschew balance in children's education, to maintain the status of his/her school, whether that status is measured by a newspaper's ranking of schools or by federal reporting. PLRs set priorities in the following order:

1. What is tested
2. What is mandated
3. What is best for children

While PLRs may pay lip service to balance by issuing statements such as "I believe that the arts are important," such statements are usually followed by the conjunction "but," after which the excuses flow. It has been wisely written that what a person truly believes in is best reflected in what s/he DOES, not what s/he says. PLRs allow curriculum to slide inexorably toward their own impoverished priorities.

Educators, on the other hand, respond to pressures to improve by seeking and implementing strategies that yield improvement across all of the core content areas. Such strategies include professional development, the development of a learning school culture, sustained work on comprehensive curriculum and curriculum-linked accountability systems, and the resources required to implement that curriculum. An Educator's top priority is always what is best for children.

Educators don't chase test scores, they pursue learning, employing standardized test results as only one of many tools to improve instruction across the curriculum.

The most obvious and important problem with chasing test scores is that they represent such a narrow range of what children need to know and be able to do. The Common Core lists nine core subject areas, but the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) assess only language arts, math and science, and only a small – albeit important – subset of content in these three subject areas at that. Hence, it is accurate to say that the vast majority of what is important for children to learn is not measured by state tests.

The second problem with focusing single-mindedly on test scores is that the content of tests is determined by decisions that are often more political or economic than educational.

Consider, for example, the current national focus on reading. Educators understand that reading is an enormously important skill. Educators *also* know that students learn to read best when they have developed a broad foundation of language arts. Such a foundation includes skill not only in written language (i.e., reading and writing), but also in the other four key dimensions of language (i.e., speaking, listening, viewing, and acting/enacting).

Educators therefore promote a balanced approach to language arts learning. Such an approach acknowledges the interrelatedness of language skills, and the realities of communication in our 21st century society, which relies increasingly on multiple media – typically abbreviated as "multimedia" – to convey ideas. For these reasons and more, the definition of "text" in Connecticut's language arts documents includes media as well as print.

Unfortunately, NCLB focuses narrowly on only the reading component of language arts, and further, under the controversially defined banner of "research-based" pedagogy, on a particular phonics-based approach that is far more structured and less tied to writing than most classroom teachers and other Educators prefer. Did writing suddenly become less important because we elected a president who is married to a librarian? No Educator believes so. (Nor, to be fair, would any good librarian.) But districts such as Seattle have taken steps toward eliminating their writing tests. After all, writing achievement is not considered in the new set of sanctions and requirements imposed by NCLB. This is a classic example of PLR policymaking.

Decisions about what is tested are also too often made based on what is inexpensive or easy, rather than what is important. A local example is instructive.

Educators realize that most children take in an enormous percentage of their information aurally, both in school and in their outside lives. In recognition that listening is a basic skill, a listening section was included in early administrations of the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs). However, as the second generation of the CMTs was revised c.1998, the listening section disappeared.

Was the decision to stop testing listening based on a discovery that the skill was no longer important? No, the decision was based primarily on two resource issues that could, and arguably should, have been solved:

1. The lack of quality sound production equipment in some schools made the test inequitable, as some students struggled to understand tapes played on poor machines attached to low-fidelity speakers.
2. It proved difficult to develop a test that measured listening comprehension skills effectively in a short time.

The Educator's solution to the former problem would have been for the state either to provide functional equipment for all classrooms, or to require districts to provide equipment that met or exceeded minimal specifications. After all, that equipment could be put to a number of important instructional uses in those same classrooms. However, rather than allocating the

necessary resources to provide sound equipment for every classroom, the decision was made to eliminate the listening section of the CMTs. There is little doubt that schools would be spending a great deal more time cultivating their students' listening skills if the listening test had remained in place.*

Similarly, the tendency to prioritize on assessing reading rather than writing has more to do with cost than relative importance. This phenomenon is ironic, because assessors can literally see the results of writing, whereas it is necessary to test reading through the "side door" by attempting to measure offshoot attributes such as comprehension.

There is no question that improving reading is a critical goal. However, it could be argued that effective writing is the highest expression of text literacy. The revised version of Bloom's taxonomy for learning, based on years of cognitive research since the original version was published, identifies Creating as the highest level of thinking.¹ This is also consistent with Educators' classroom experience. Just as the creation of speech is more advanced than, and therefore follows, listening in toddlers... so also the creation of written text is a more advanced skill than reading text created by others. Good writing is therefore more likely to suggest reading skill than vice versa.

Hence, if a choice were to be made between measuring students' writing and measuring their reading, Educators would likely choose the former. Nevertheless, because reading can be measured to some extent through selected response test items, which are less expensive to administer than essay items, reading assessments tend to receive more emphasis than writing. It is therefore a tribute to the integrity of Connecticut's educational leadership that in an era when NCLB focuses exclusively on reading, the writing sections of the CMTs and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) will continue and even improve.

Educators don't solve an instructional problem by diverting resources from other core curriculum areas.

Connecticut State Department of Education data suggest that the average Connecticut elementary school is already devoting 50% of the school day to teaching language arts, a staggering total that does not include the extensive language usage inherent in the teaching and learning of other subjects. It is therefore incredible to argue that students are impeded from learning language arts by lack of instructional time.

Educators realize that stealing time from the tiny sliver of instruction typically allocated to other core subjects, such as the arts or social studies, is not the answer to improving language learning. Instead, they devote research and professional development to improving instruction within balanced time allocations, in language arts as well as the other core subject areas.

Educators also take advantage of the many natural opportunities for language learning across the curriculum. There is considerable overlap between standards in other disciplines and those in language arts, which provide opportunities for reinforcement and application of language learning. Standards in the other core disciplines call for students to research, describe, analyze,

* New York is among the states that continue to test listening.

reflect, and evaluate; to connect events to historical or contemporary causes; and to draw inferences and predict outcomes, all of which naturally take verbal form, both oral and written. Standards in both language arts and the arts call for students to communicate through a variety of media. Even more obviously, theatre inherently addresses all of the six areas of language arts mentioned above, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and enacting. Curriculum design should exploit these connections to enhance language learning without sacrificing learning in other core content areas.

Language arts learning also occurs in the majority of truly interdisciplinary curriculum units. In quality interdisciplinary work, students demonstrate achievement of standards-based objectives in each of the subjects being connected.² A common thread running through many of these units is that a non-language arts subject area provides the content about which students either communicate (write, speak, or use media to convey ideas) or synthesize the communications of others (read, listen, interpret media).

So what can be done?

Educators and Leaders at the school level don't have the opportunity to determine state and federal policy (although they certainly should express their informed opinions!). What they CAN influence are decisions at the local level that impact children. The remainder of this article is designed to guide school leaders in achieving balance.

The conditions for balance

School leaders always have a profound influence on curriculum balance. Teachers, like their students, are very aware of issues of fairness and equitable opportunity. Consciously or not, school leaders send clear messages about what is important. The effect is very analogous to sexism and racism – perhaps it should be called "subjectism." "Subjectist" statements often begin with the words, "I believe that [insert subject name] is very important, BUT ..." Balance can be particularly endangered in site-based management situations, where the personal biases of an individual school administrator can have a devastating effect on instruction, resources, and professional development in curriculum areas of low personal priority.

In each of Connecticut's series of standards-based guides, entitled "A Guide to K-12 Program Development in ...", Chapter 3 presents a description of the key "opportunity-to-learn" components that enable children to receive a quality education in each subject area.

Among the key opportunity-to-learn components that must be balanced are the following...

Balanced Time

Instructional time is not the only indicator of balance but, as the saying goes, "it is way ahead of whatever is in second place." This is, therefore, the single most important area where Educators work to ensure balance. The CSDE has published guidelines for balanced instruction that are still relevant and doable within the typical school day.³

[Insert Table 2 – Recommended Ranges for Instructional Time – about here]

At the elementary level, using the lower end of the recommended time range for most subject areas frees up time to add optional subjects or to increase instructional time in areas of need. At the secondary level, requiring less than four years of study in some subject areas leaves time for electives outside the core.

Balanced Scheduling

It is necessary to schedule schools so that all children genuinely have the opportunity to receive quality instruction in all subject areas. One of the most important roles of an administrator is to work with faculty and curricula to ensure such a schedule. It is all too common for schools to force new content into an already crowded curriculum, or a new course into a middle school “wheel” that already shortchanges instructional time in certain subjects, without even acknowledging the need for – much less making – the tough decision of what will have to be left behind. Such decisions must be made, in a way that maintains balanced, quality learning across the curriculum.

Balanced Staffing

Educators add teachers in nontested areas, such as the arts and physical education, when their districts open new schools or redistribute grades across elementary and middle schools. They also consider expertise in non-CMT subject areas when interviewing and hiring elementary classroom teachers, and cultivate such expertise through professional development.

Balanced Professional Treatment

Not surprisingly, research shows that respectful and supportive treatment of faculty is not only professionally appropriate, but also improves teacher retention. One common area of inequity is in the assignment of duties, which tend to fall heaviest on teachers of nontested subjects. Such practices send a message that those subjects are deemed less important. Particularly during this time of teacher shortages in nontested core areas such as music, treating faculty professionally is far more cost-effective than having to hire and support new faculty every few years.

Balanced Professional Development

PLR schools tend to focus professional development narrowly on improving test scores, thereby neglecting the development of faculty in nontested subject areas, which – as pointed out earlier – actually constitute the majority of the core curriculum. Teachers in every field need and deserve not only district-sponsored workshops for their subject area, but also the opportunity to reconnect with other experts in their disciplines, by attending state and national professional development conferences specifically designed to meet their needs.

Balanced Curriculum

In past years, the SDE conducted periodic reviews of local curricula to ensure that districts were updating instruction regularly. In the absence of such reviews, PLRs are tempted to develop curriculum only for tested subject areas. Alternatively, they devote all of the district's curriculum development time and resources to tested areas, while asking faculty in other areas to update their curricula on their own time or in occasional late-afternoon meetings. Educators understand that developing quality curriculum in all subject areas requires significant, sustained time and resources, and on the same five-year cycle as curriculum in CMT subject areas.

Balanced Facilities

Children who receive instruction in inadequate facilities do not receive the same curriculum as do students learning in appropriate facilities. For example, elementary students who learn music in a regular (non-dedicated) classroom miss out on essential learning activities such as dancing and learning to play mallet keyboard instruments. School construction and renovation plans must include appropriate specialized facilities to provide quality instruction across the curriculum. Districts coping with growing school populations should ensure that such facilities remain available, even if it means adopting strategies such as team-teaching in regular classrooms.

Balanced School/District Improvement Plans

Educators seek balance when working to identify school improvement priorities. They consider data from a variety of sources, and consider the full spectrum of the curriculum when developing goals. Only PLRs would create a plan focused entirely on the improvement of standardized test scores.

Balanced Resources

Educators allocate resources to support curriculum in all subject areas. For example, they equip computer labs with drawing tablets, MIDI keyboards and headphones, and other equipment essential to quality arts programs. They also ensure that art teachers have digital cameras, and music teachers have recording equipment, for the preservation and evaluation of student work.

Educators interested in getting a clearer idea of how to allocate resources to support quality programs in each discipline should consult relevant sections of Connecticut's program guide series, such as chapter 3 of "A Guide to K-12 Program Development in the Arts." The SDE curriculum web page also provides links to resources that Educators will find useful.

Tough Times Demand Educator-Leaders

Schools lose their balance when they cease to emphasize the needs of the whole child and succumb to the lure of test scores. Children learn best and most joyfully when they experience a curriculum that is rich in scope; in styles of teaching and learning; and in movement, sounds and visual imagery as well as text. While in the short term a narrow test-preparation curriculum may seem like the easy road to success – i.e., the Path of Least Resistance – in reality such a narrow approach produces precisely the kind of numbing curriculum that is most likely to Leave Children Behind.

Regardless of budgets and outside pressures, Educators – and, particularly, those who are school administrators – ultimately determine whether students receive a comprehensive education. ASCD members, who understand and care about curriculum, should be the first to stand up for balance. The beneficiaries will be our students, who will live fuller lives as a result.

Table 1: Core Subjects All Students Should Study According to Leading Educational Organizations

| College Board: The Basic Academic Subjects for College Preparation¹ | National Education Goal 3: Core Subject Matter² | “No Child Left Behind” Act: Core Academic Subjects³ | NASSP: Essential Learnings for High School Graduation⁴ | U.S. Department of Education: High School Courses Recommended for College⁵ |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| English | English | English and Reading | Literature | English |
| The Arts | The Arts | The Arts | The Arts | Visual and Performing Arts |
| Mathematics | Mathematics | Mathematics | Mathematics | Mathematics |
| Science | Science | Science | Science | Laboratory Science |
| Social Studies | History, Geography, Economics, Civics and Government | History, Geography, Economics, Civics and Government | Social Studies | History and Geography |
| Foreign Language | Foreign Languages | Foreign Languages | Language | Foreign Language |

¹ The College Board (1983). *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*. New York, NY: The College Board.

² U.S. Congress. *GOALS 2000: Educate America Act*. Signed into law on March 31, 1994.

³ U.S. Congress. *No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA)*. Signed into law on January 9, 2002.

⁴ National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1996). *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. Reston, VA: NASSP.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education (1998). *Getting Ready for College Early*. Washington, D.C.: USDOE.

**Table 2: Recommended Ranges for Instructional Time
Connecticut State Department of Education**

Minutes Per Week *

| | Grades 1 - 3 | Grades 4 - 5 (- 6) |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| The Arts | | |
| - Art, Visual | 60-100 | 60-100 |
| - Music | 60-100 | 60-100 |
| Language Arts | 900-1,200 | 645-900 |
| Mathematics | 225-300 | 300-375 |
| Physical Education | 60-100 | 90-150 |
| Science | 75-150 | 75-150 |
| Social Studies | 75-150 | 120-200 |
| World Languages | 25-75 | 100-125 |
| Total in Minutes: | 1480 - 2175 | 1460 - 2100 |
| Total in Hrs./Day: | 4.9 – 7.25 | 4.9 – 7.0 |

* Table omits subjects marked as “optional”

Periods Per Week **

| | Grades (6) – 7 - 8 | Grades 9 - 12 |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| The Arts | | |
| - Art, Visual ^ | 5 | 5 |
| - Music | 3 | 5 |
| Health & Safety ^ | 5 | 5 |
| Language Arts | 5 | 5 |
| Mathematics | 5 | 5 |
| Physical Education | 3 | 5 |
| Science (with Laboratory) | 7 | 7 |
| Social Studies | 5 | 5 |
| Technology Education | 3 | 5 |
| World Languages | 5 | 5 |
| Total Instructional Periods/Week (if students took every subject every year): | 41 | 47 |

** Table omits subjects outside the 9 *Common Core of Learning* core subjects and substitutes the newer term “Technology Education” for Industrial Arts

^ For half a school year

¹ Anderson, Lorin W. and Krathwohl, David R. (Ed.) (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

² Connecticut State Department of Education (in editing). *Connecticut Guide to Interdisciplinary Curriculum Development, Using the Arts and Geography as Models*. Hartford: CSDE.

³ Connecticut State Department of Education (1981). *A Guide to Curriculum Development: Purposes, Practices and Procedures*. Hartford: CSDE.