

POINTS OF VIEW

Schools of choice can update our education

From mounting foreign trade deficits to the continued export of jobs, economic realities threaten the fabric of our society. The challenge is obvious. We need to prepare our children to prosper in a global marketplace.

Many say our American education system — once the envy of the world — isn't up to the task: the list of charges is quite long, low SAT scores, poor math and sciences skills compared to countries like Japan and Germany, too few hours spent in school year, insufficiently trained or motivated teachers.

These discussions usually end up pointing a finger at the lack of sufficient financial resources. Yet, I believe that the issue is not how much money we spend on education, but how well we spend the money we do allocate.

One possible path to improved education is the "Schools of Choice" concept, an idea being suggested more and more across the country. The plan converts school tax dollar allocations into vouchers. Parents "cash" these vouchers at any school, public or private; nearby or farther away. Schools would bow to the marketplace forces of supply and demand as parents settle on the criteria for choice. These criteria can range from student-teacher and college entrance ratios to religious affiliation and extracurricular programs.

Hopefully, the meaningful will prevail over the frivolous with this free market idea. Overall, top-notch schools should survive and flourish. Lackluster schools will be forced to improve or possibly face extinction.

The school of choice concept is not



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meant to be an indictment of our public school systems. Rather, the goal is to encourage improvement by all schools, public and private. Better use of available dollars, new efforts by teachers to stimulate learning in both high and low achievers, and more in-

volvement by parents in education are all part of this picture.

Some of these ideas are already taking root. Many public school systems across the nation have created "consumer-driven," districtwide schools. These schools typically offer special programs or services and have highly competitive admission criteria. They include the already familiar performing arts or technical arts high schools. I believe these schools reflect a new appreciation for values, discipline and hard work by parents and students.

This is all very encouraging but choice also brings responsibility. As suggested before, a voucher system would challenge parents to choose wisely as they become more involved in their child's education. As schools con-

centrate on core educational objectives they will, for example, need more volunteer help with transportation or supervision of extracurricular activities. While some of these changes will strain "time-poor" households, they will also promote creativity and commitment. Education, once again, will be a community endeavor.

If America's education system and competitive posture are to improve, we must explore alternatives to business-as-usual. From my vantage point, schools of choice is an idea whose time has come.

Thomas Herbst is headmaster of Kensington Academy, an independent, coed, Catholic day school for students pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade.

New educational movements twist old theories

QUESTION: You have indicated that a balance is needed between so-called new educational movements and basic skill teaching. How does higher level thinking fit in? I hear different views of outcome-based education, the developmental process and other movements. Are these movements something new?

ANSWER: In the last two years, we've seen great emphasis placed on higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills. The latest theory is that students should learn basic skills in a manner more meaningful than drill and practice.

This movement means to overcome our focus on basic skill mastery as preparation for the MEAP, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test, which gets big-time print in the newspapers every year.

But is this higher-level thinking concept a new movement? The answer, in my opinion, is that education flip-flops from one movement to another, depending on which professor wrote the latest bestseller or came up with a new twist to an old concept.

Historically, one of our greatest teachers, Socrates, believed in higher-level thinking and problem solving skills. He was an inductive reasoner, meaning, "Let's look at all the evidence, reason together and draw conclusions."

This seems to be the theory of some of our whole-language advocates today. But all great artists, writers, musicians and athletes drill and practice to master fundamental skills.

Deductive reasoning

Moving on in history, we had a deductive reasoning (stating a belief



DOC DOYLE

and proving it) theory, such as the medieval monks writing the "truth," as they saw it, and supporting it with data they generated. This went on for some time until the Renaissance. Then we had the industrial revolution. Education began to focus on basic math and science skills, which helped lead to the cotton gin, the automobile,

Education for children was primarily drill and practice.

In the 1920s, John Dewey, one of our greatest educational philosophers, believed children could learn through problem solving and higher-level thinking. Students could plan and work together on research issues. The fundamental skills would be learned along the way. He was the father of what was called core curriculum.

Today's core curriculum, as far as language study goes, is the whole-language approach.

The developmental process is nothing more than a theory that says, "Take a child from where he/she is, and recognize that all individuals learn at different rates and have different learning styles (some audio learning, some more visual)."

In regard to your question about

what is outcome-based learning, again, it is not new. I used it in my first year of teaching. The concept simply means you state measurable outcomes, teach to that objective, then reteach and retest until mastery occurs and don't just pass the kid on to another teacher.

In theory it is a sound; I believe in it. In reality, it still leaves us with the same problems: big class sizes, funding problems, parental distrust, etc.

So don't get thrown on new titles in education. Children who become good learners use both thinking skills and drill and practice, and children are great survivors of titles given to educational concepts.

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