

Principal urges teaching how to think, not just facts

By Patricia N. Bowling
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After decades of asking the same questions, elementary teachers now learn they may be asking the wrong questions.

Who, what, when, explain and define have been the key words in teaching knowledge and comprehension to children.

However, as educators, including those in Walled Lake schools, examine how to prepare youngsters for a rapidly changing, more technical and highly complex society, a new set of key

words is gaining equal importance.

Distinguish, compare, interpret and justify are the question starters that instructors must use to teach children to think, not just to recall facts.

"What is taught, and especially what is tested in today's elementary schools, is of a concrete and objective nature," explained Robert Voss, principal of Maple Elementary School in West Bloomfield. "In other words, it appears we teach to the facts but not to the thinking processes. (As a result) students are, at best, equipped with a set of facts that may become irrelevant to their future needs."

VOSS PARTICIPATED on a committee of teachers and principals that was formed in 1978 to study the need for teaching "Critical Thinking Skills" in Walled Lake schools. Although the study was launched with federal dollars, much of the work was done "on the side" with no school district dollars available, he said.

This month Voss conducted an in-service workshop at Walled Lake Western High School to teach 14 elementary instructors how to include higher level thinking skills in classroom activities.

"Eighty percent of what you're teaching will not be useful (to the students) when they graduate from high school," Voss said. "The higher thinking skills — analysis, synthesis and evaluation — probably comprise less than 10

percent (of the curriculum). They're not learned as easily, they're not taught as easily, and they're not tested as easily."

CRITICAL THINKING skills soon may become "the next educational bandwagon," Voss said. "We'll all be jumping on." Supplemental classroom materials offering exercises in thinking skills already are becoming available, he added.

"But the problem with these materials is that they don't show the teacher how to teach the process (for critical thinking)," Voss cautioned. Consequently, students likely will be dumfounded when suddenly confronted with a question that requires them to evaluate, justify or interpret.

"The critical thinking skills project is designed to develop student skills in processing information, reasoning and in making sound judgments," Voss noted in his introduction to the in-service.

TESTING THINKING skills is a particular problem at the upper level, Voss said. Multiple choice and true/false questions test knowledge and comprehension, but to test whether a child is thinking about the material being taught requires an essay question. If the instructor has 200 students, testing higher level thinking skills may be prohibitive.

In the course of its research the committee evaluated samples of social studies curriculum in grades 3-6. More than 90 percent of the learning objectives emphasized knowledge and comprehension. The higher thinking skills of analysis and evaluation nearly were non-existent among the social studies objectives.

IN OBSERVING 11 elementary classrooms, committee members discovered that discussion focused on fact recall and understanding. When polled, only 3 percent of the teachers said they did a very good job of providing opportunity for students to practice higher level thinking. Fifty-five percent said they did an adequate to good job, and 42 percent said they did a fair-to-poor job.

The majority of these same teachers said the Walled Lake schools curriculum does not provide adequately for teaching critical thinking.

The transition to teaching critical thinking is not an easy one, Voss said. "It's hard to explain the concept of there being 'no right answer' after teaching primarily knowledge and comprehension," he said.

Tower hearing set by council

Amateur radio operators will have one more opportunity to convince Farmington Hills officials to change the city's height restrictions for antenna towers at a public hearing scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, April 30.

Supporters and opponents of the proposed antenna height change will share a portion of the special city council meeting in April with residents opposing a proposed zone change at Franklin Fairway and 13 Mile, near Northwestern Highway.

Farmington Hills City Council this week scheduled the special meeting because both issues are expected to be controversial and to draw large crowds.

Ham radio operators will be asking the council members to overturn a recent planning commission's recommended denial of a request to add an-

tenna towers to the zoning ordinance's list of height exceptions.

If the council overturns the planning commission's recommendation, radio operators would be allowed to build antennas to a maximum 75 feet. Currently, ham operator towers are restricted to 25 feet.

Residents from the most of the city's subdivisions, however, are opposed to the proposed height change. They maintain that the current procedure of allowing the zoning board of appeals to grant variances to extend antenna towers beyond 25 feet is the best option for neighbors who are allowed to support or oppose the variance before it is granted.

A big turnout is also expected when the council considers the planning commission's recommendation to rezone property at Franklin Fairway and 13 Mile from residential to office.

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