

POINTS OF VIEW

# Expanded basics help develop 'whole' students

The basics are still alive and well in Farmington's elementary schools.

From my experiences in teaching in two elementary schools in the past eight years, I see teachers valuing the basics, but also expanding them so that children are motivated and enabled to learn meaningfully.

Our philosophy is to teach and develop whole students, not just teach academic subjects and isolated skills. The curriculum we deliver and the style in which we deliver it enables kids to leave elementary school with the basic foundation for lifelong learning.

Our philosophy encourages thinking on many levels, values students' background knowledge and experiences, and connects and expands their experiential background with an enriched curriculum.

This has been clearly proven in many of our schools by high test scores, kids' attitudes toward school, parent support and the quality of work we see.

The Observer has published recent letters and articles implying Farmington teachers are giving up on teaching phonics.

**Phonics essential**

Phonics is an essential part of reading and it is taught in all our schools. It is also an integral part of whole language. The belief that only an intensive grounding in phonics will lead to reading competency is a misconception.

I have observed that kids who can only do phonics are word-bound, hesitant readers who read for sounds instead of meaning.

When literature and related activities are well chosen, comprehension will be extended and students' lives will be enriched. I have taught using basals and workbooks and, more recently, in the past three years, using whole language.

**Making it 'come alive'**

Now I find kids love reading so much more using good children's literature. Teachers using whole language teach skills and reading strategies through the use of literature that spans the curriculum.

Through integrating our curriculum and making language come alive in the classroom, we continue to develop, enhance and enrich lifelong, active literacy in our students.


Inventive spelling in classrooms has also come under question. In Farmington, the process approach to writing is taught.

Children learn prewriting skills where they think and brainstorm about what they are going to write, they edit their thoughts in draft form, then edit and revise, and finally publish their writing.

Inventive spelling is appropriate in certain stages of writing. It allows the student freedom and flow of his/her thoughts without getting hung up on mechanics in that stage of the writing process.

As we move to improving skills and children grow and become more literate, students are made aware of improper spelling and the importance of correction. In journal writing, where

**GUEST COLUMNIST**



**DODIE HARRIS**

the audience is usually only the writer, the teacher and perhaps the parent, spelling does not have the same significance as writing a final project, report, or a piece ready for publication where there is a larger audience.

**Math basics live**

In teaching math, the basics again are alive and well in Farmington. We want children to understand and work through concepts meaningfully so they understand them, not just memorize them.

There is a place for drill and children must know their basic facts. However, there is much more to a good math understanding than knowing your flashcards. Math strategies are taught and manipulatives are used so children can feel, see and understand the relevance of math concepts rather than just mechanically come up with an answer.

In many classrooms, whole language is connected to math. Students have experienced wonderful children's literature containing math themes.

Children write and speak math stories and display their math conceptual understanding in their written expression. Farmington elementary teachers provide an enriched math curriculum that goes well beyond the basics.

Farmington teachers feel strongly that education is a joint adventure between home and school. Parents want to be involved and we want them involved in meaningful ways.

It has been my experience that kids seem to do better in school when they sense that their parents and teachers agree about their education.

Parents set the stage for their children having good attitudes for learning and school, provide the experiences on which their children build intellectual skills, and give the security for their children to develop to their fullest.

Parents, working with the school, can make a difference in the level of success in school and later careers of their children.

Teachers and parents must be partners in a child's education and that is why communication between the school and home is so valued in Farmington.

As a teacher in the Farmington public schools, I am proud of my district because I know it provides an exciting learning environment where this can all take place.

*Dodie Harris is a fourth-grade teacher at Hillside Elementary School in the Farmington School District.*

LETTERS

**Save the forests**

President Clinton and Vice President Gore have recently announced their plan to cut waste in government.

Unfortunately, the President has another plan that will allow the cutting of a very important and beautiful national treasure: the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Towering up to 300 feet, the trees of the ancient forest in the Pacific Northwest are among the last survivors of the natural world untouched by humans in North America.

The last of the ancient forests, however, are under assault by timber companies that threaten to wipe out the last of the majestic trees in less than 20 years.

President Clinton campaigned on a promise to protect the remaining forests.

His forest plan announced in July is woefully inadequate. Not only does the plan fail to provide real permanent protection, it also distorts the issue through the use of misleading statistics.

The ancient forest plan must be changed immediately:

- Stop all logging and salvaging in the ancient forests.
- Prohibit all road building and other commercial activities.

Enforce existing law by protecting endangered species.

Ancient forests are a unique and valuable ecosystem. The forests are home to over 200 animal and countless plant species, and they maintain water quality by protecting rivers and streams.

The forests also support a growing tourist and recreation economy in the Northwest.

The Clinton administration must

hear from those who seek to preserve a public treasure from the destruction by private interests.

The courts have mandated that the President take public comment on his plan until Oct. 28. Now is the time to stand up and speak out for the permanent protection of this great American treasure.

*Sonia Chawin, Troy*

## Dismal findings in reading match national averages

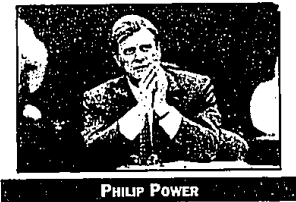
People in my line of work get a lot of press releases — we call 'em "handouts" — and I'm no exception. I've never seen as many handouts as now, all announcing hearings on what's to happen with Michigan's kindergarten through 12th grade school system.

The State Board of Education is holding Hearings. So is the state Senate Republican caucus. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Democratic candidate for governor, is holding hearings. Democrats in the state House are holding hearings. The MEA, Michigan's largest teachers union, isn't holding hearings, but it's testifying like crazy.

This is all to the good, although grumpy folks like me can't help suspecting that all this frenzy for public input is just window dressing for what will be entirely insider power plays when the deals finally get cut about how to fund and structure Michigan's schools.

For readers interested in attending hearings and keeping their heads clear in the blizzard of emotion and hype, claim and counterclaim, here are a few facts and conclusions to keep in mind:

- According to a recent national study, "Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States," 41 percent of Michigan's fourth graders cannot read at a basic level. Despite that dismal finding, Michigan's scores ranked just above the national average. Our schools are failing; so, too, are schools throughout America.
- Another national survey recently concluded that just a little more than half of America's workers were "workforce illiterate" — that is, could not read instructions, understand blueprints, operate tools and machinery and make simple job-related computations. Surprise! Poor schools produce poor workers.
- Harold Stevenson, a professor at the University of Michigan, has been studying the differences between American and Asian school achievements between 14 years. Comparing fourth grade math achievement between 30 Chicago-area schools and 30 in Japan, he found only one American school attained a score as high as the lowest score charted in Japan. No wonder the Japanese are beating us in international economic competition.
- Over the past 15 years in Michigan, inflation-adjusted spending on schools increased by about 25 percent while the number of children in schools dropped by about a quarter, and test scores declined somewhat. Throwing money at



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the schools doesn't help.

While you're listening to the testimony, you might also want to remember that some important steps already have been taken in Michigan to improve school performance.

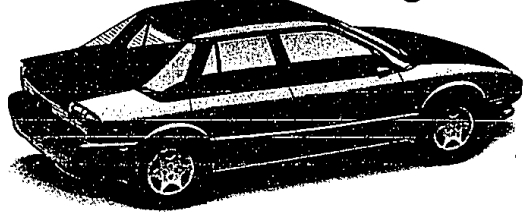
The state now gives MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) tests annually to kids in various grades. This newspaper publishes results for local schools, building by building. Thousands of parents are learning just how their local schools are stacking up, and just how necessary, demanding improvement.

Beginning with the class of 1994, state-endorsed diplomas will be given only to graduates who measure up on assessment tests. At a time when jobs are scarce, this may have real impact. I don't know many employers interested in hiring kids with inferior diplomas.

These are good steps, only now beginning to show some results. You might want to remind the various holders of hearings that throwing out the baby with the bathwater is a mistake, too.

*Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 963-2047 ext. 1880.*

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