

## CHANGES: WHAT'S BEST FOR KIDS IN SCHOOL

By Robert Rubinstein

(published in the March '2002, THE WORLD & I)

“A parent or teacher who treats a child with dignity builds the self-esteem of the child and automatically increases the child’s performance, which generally improves the child’s conduct. . . . and when you treat others with respect and dignity, your own self-respect and sense of dignity improves.” (Zig Ziglar, “Motivational Messages”)

Hopefully, most of us agree that education and schools are about young people – about kids –and how to support and help them to become productive, well-adjusted and positive adults in their future lives

Improving education should focus on how to achieve the best for kids and their futures.

Yet, we adults – who assume we know what’s best for young people today – seldom, if ever, ask these young people what they think they need and want from their school education and for their futures

We are a quick fix society that wants to solve complex and compound problems with a test or a voucher. However, to improve the education system and situation in our country it will take multiple approaches and long-term commitment, including money. We – not the students – have sustained a 1950s school philosophy when we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have allowed the schools to deteriorate and the shortage of quality teachers to become critical. Students didn’t do this.

### THE TEEN PANEL:

Beginning in the fifth grade through the senior year in high school, schools should have teen panels at the beginning and two-thirds of the way through the school year. On these panels, students would express ideas, and feelings about their education experiences to school staff and parents. The panels would represent a cross-section of students from the advanced to the remedial, from the affluent to the low income and homeless, from different cultural/religious backgrounds who may attend that school. Those on the panels might comment on curriculum,

discrimination, school atmosphere, testing and state benchmarks, their goals, their problems or concerns, teaching or administration in general, etc.

Of course, one of the key factors is that the students feel free to express their needs and feelings without repercussions from the adults. If they cannot do this and there is no trust, then why would students confide in adults about other matters – even life-threatening ones? Then, too, the adults must be able to have the skill to listen – really listen without condescending attitudes and negative body language – to what these young people say and seriously consider how they might support the students’ needs as the students see those needs in the world in which they must live. We adults have a difficult time of this – especially valuing young people’s feelings and ideas.

So, when a student on one of these panels notes a concern, need, or suggests an improvement, then a staff member should be able to paraphrase for the entire group what that student said. This should be done by a variety of adults in the audience, not just one acting as a spokesperson. The adult paraphrasing must maintain a neutral voice, free of disdain or disbelief. By doing this, the student knows he’s been heard – that someone’s actually listening.

## HEADSTART, PRE-SCHOOL, KINDERGARTEN

Research has shown that the most important years for a child to develop learning and social skills are the first five years of that child’s life. During those first five years, the child develops basic skills and attitudes that will form the structure for life-learning. Therefore, it is critical to do as much as possible to make certain these formative years lead to the most positive ways to begin on the paths of learning.

We need to increase funding, qualified people, supervised and certified child care, and early school-community and home contacts to assess and help children in these early years. We need to increase and expand our commitment to the Early Head Start and Head Start programs. With these efforts we must reach children at all socio-economic levels, and not assume that because a child comes from a middle class or upper class economic family that the child is receiving the guidance and positive re-enforcement necessary. Many parents at this economic level are “too busy” to guide their children.

According to a study by the Chicago Child-Parent Center, young children in the Head Start programs had a 29 percent higher high school completion rate, a 41 percent lower rate of being placed in special education, and a 40 percent less likelihood of being held back a grade.

This study followed some 500 students over seventeen years, and also noted that these children also had a 33 percent less likelihood of having been arrested and a 42 percent less likelihood of being arrested for a violent crime. (David Broder’s

column “Program helps kids get a good start” – July 26, 2001) In the State of Michigan, the ratio of students to teachers is about 18 to one; the ratio of prisoners to guards in that state’s prisons is five to one. (“Harper’s Index,” July 2001) When we consider the cost to society of dealing with teens and adults who haven’t had successful learning experiences as well as those who cost us so much with crime and being imprisoned(some \$50,000 per year per person), these early childhood programs must have top priority.

Students in pre-school and kindergarten should be carefully screened by qualified people to assess vision, perception and neurological problems that, if not corrected, will affect their learning for a life-time . Teachers of pre-school through elementary school grades should be trained to teach brain gym activities to strengthen perception and neurological abilities. From pre-school through the school years, children should be taught a second language. In our country today that language should be Spanish. Studies show that these formative years are the best and easiest time for a child to learn a foreign language, and that just learning another language furthers multicultural understanding, tolerance and cultural appreciation.

The school-community could design literacy programs and through home contacts, encourage parents to learn to read along with their children. Perhaps, some type of assessment of family needs might also be done. Children who don’t have enough to eat, a safe place to sleep and live do not learn well – who would under these circumstances? Yet, in many parts of our country, 20% or more of the children live in poverty and do go hungry. There is a need for programs to help parents help their children learn effectively and enjoyably. When a person is happy doing something, then he learns more and retains what he learns.

Parents, today, with their hectic schedules, seldom have the energy and time to enjoy being with their children, much less the skills, knowledge, and ability to recognize, discuss and resolve problems. Only 18% of today's families have one parent at home and not working. (U.S.A. NEWSPAPER - 12/27/99). As a result, children's needs and guidance are often neglected; many students fail, families become destroyed, societies fear violence, and much of the future generation grows into angry, unfocused and uncaring adults. Every child needs a caring, positive adult in his or her life. These young people are our future.

### **CHANGING CURRICULUM:**

When you are interested in a topic, have some choice in the subject you study, you learn much more effectively and enjoy learning. Since 1969, students at Roosevelt Middle School in Eugene, Oregon, have had that choice. Through those years, the students have annually achieved among the best state testing scores and, with the choice and advisor system, maintained a very positive, enthusiastic school

atmosphere with few discipline problems. Each year, nearly one-third of the students of the 800 plus students in Roosevelt have transferred into this program. Many of these transfers had not experienced success in other schools. However, the Roosevelt program is certainly not the place for all students because it asks students to be responsible for the privilege of having choice in their curriculum.

With a little innovation and creativity, teachers can incorporate the essential basic learning skills within the specially designed classes. Roosevelt students are expected to – and usually do – choose to take a math sequence for the year as well as two terms of science, two terms of social studies, two terms of language arts, two physical education classes. Some classes are year-long sequences and others last twelve-weeks, with registration occurring three times a year. These registrations and class changes refresh both students and teachers. The choice a student makes for that term's registration requires the approval of both the teacher-advisor and the parent.

So, students each term may be able to choose from such classes as Shakespeare, "Great Themes," debate, "Through The Camera's Eye: American history through films," women in history, China, multicultural mythology, chemistry, math games, computer graphics, wind ensemble, Medieval times, space science, "Wild & Tame" – animal literature and the care of animals, folktales and storytelling, space exploration, and more. Each class is designed to meet specific education goals as well as to assess and record student work samples. This IS the regular curriculum at Roosevelt.

When we talk about "high school drop-outs," those students have started on the "drop-out path" in middle school. They have found little of interest in the middle school curriculum, little that seems useful to them in their present and future lives, and have experienced little success. When a person is not interested and doesn't feel valued or successful, why would they continue to invest and try? Just because we adults tell them to do so and give them tests?

We have a fragmented curriculum in most American schools in which one course of study or class has little, if any, relationship to the others in a student's day. So for one period the student may study Shakespeare's play, the next class may be history of Japan, followed by American music, Spanish, calculus. Students may have 3-5 minutes to travel from one class to the next, including stopping at lockers. There's no time to digest what they've just learned before they are dropped into another subject that doesn't relate. Minds and learning don't work well this way. In most school systems, students have time to at least mentally process what they have learned in one class before going on to the next.

Could we adults endure a day of five-minute passing time between classes, while attending six or eight classes per day? Yet, we ask 10 to 18 year-olds, with

all their personal concerns and distractions, hormones, and body changes to successfully manage such a schedule. This doesn't make sense.

Indeed, educational systems elsewhere in the world do have longer school days, but from 12-2 P.M. the students have free time to have lunch, relax, and/or socialize. This provides them with a psychological break, and they return with a more open and positive attitude, and are more productive even to the hours of five or six.

Some schools have developed block periods where students only meet for four classes a day in 70-minute or two-hour periods every other day. With this system, science labs can be conducted in more depth, extended class activities can happen, a number of different learning activities can be incorporated in that period. There's a much more relaxed atmosphere where students can ask questions and learn more effectively.

Ironically, in our information age, what teachers should not be emphasizing is information. Known information doubles every 18 months or less. No one can be an all-knowing expert anymore. There's just too much information to memorize. As Einstein said, "Don't commit to memory what you can look up." Teachers must teach how to locate what information is available, evaluate whether it's worth using, and then how to use it effectively. Even more importantly, though, teachers must be concerned with how the students perceive the curriculum: What they do and do not understand? How is it relevant to the students' world? We must not be so consumed with getting from point A to point B in the curriculum and to give the test that we lose students along the way.

With a little coordination, curriculums might relate better for students. If they study Shakespeare in one class, why not Elizabethan English history in the next, some mathematics and science in these times, a taste of Elizabethan art and crafts, while studying Spanish – also look at Spain's relations with England? This would make learning more interesting, understandable, and comprehensive.

#### SPECIALIZED HIGH SCHOOLS:

In a similar way, why not have more in-depth and specialized high school programs that would give choice to a range of students, not just those college-bound? High school curriculums and teachers focus most of their attention on students who are "college material." Classes – such as wood and metal shops, automotive, art, music, drama, business, even sports - that don't fit this focus are the first to be cut from the curriculum. In most countries, art, music, drama are required subjects in the curriculum.

Some students know they don't have the learning skills for college or can't afford college; others have little interest in college programs. While other countries offer vocational training or apprenticeships, in this country, we usually

don't. This leaves the students with little choice: college or what? Yet, we need plumbers, electricians, mechanics, etc., in the future.

With the shrinking school budgets and limited resources, why not have high schools that specialize in different areas: college-bound, business and technology, computer technology, science, the arts, applied arts. In the eleventh grade and for the last two years of high school, students would be able to choose the high school program that best suits them and interests them. Then, solicit professionals from each area and their businesses to invest and mentor apprenticeship or intern programs in one of the specialized high school. Basic skills can be incorporated in any and all the classes at one of these specialized high schools. What we must insure here is that each program has a quality curriculum and quality teachers.

Socialization is and should be an important part of the school day. In school, young people learn to work together, responsibility to the group, solve problems in groups, understand and tolerate a wide-range of people with different abilities and interests. These are life-skills, far more important than passing a test. What happens then when schools eliminate recess or physical education, the students' limited "social" time, to have students prepare more for tests? Almost 80 percent of young people 16-25 years of age who lose jobs do so not because they lack knowledge or skills, but because they cannot cooperate with fellow workers, have little sense of responsibility, and will or cannot follow directions. When there were two-parent families and stable homes, many might have learned these social skills at home, but not so today. The main place students can learn life-skills is in the school.

#### THE COMPREHENSIVE LIFE-SKILLS PROGRAM:

Our schools, due to budget cuts and focus on academic testing, have cut the very programs that can make a difference to many learners who are not linear learners, which are approximately 80% of students. Many schools have cut classes and activities that help students realize their progress and accomplishments. Classes that develop practical life-skills have been eliminated: wood shop, electrical shop, drama, instrumental music, intra-mural sports, art, business.

Do we sincerely want to help our children? Do we sincerely want to invest and save children's lives and futures? Do we want to invest our money wisely for long-term benefits? If we do, then we must develop continuing programs to support, guide, and teach children from their very early years through the senior year in high school about life-skills.

One way to invest and guide our children is to make as certain as possible that each child, no matter what his or her social-economic situation receives essential life-skill education. From kindergarten through the senior year in high school, each child in every school would spend the time after school for one-half

the school year learning and developing essential life skills from paid professionals, volunteers, or university/community college students fulfilling internships experiences in local communities.

Two weekday afternoons, a child would work with a different focus group, possibly from the hours of three to six, the most dangerous hours, the “latchkey period,” for children who are usually left unsupervised. At different grade levels, non-professional teachers would offer a wide variety of activities that emphasize different skills and interests.

Some of these focus areas, in succeeding school years, would include:

Learning about foods - then diet - followed by shopping trips to the grocery store to choose and buy foods;

Keeping clean and healthy – then, in succeeding years, about smoking, alcohol and drugs - sex and venereal diseases;

How to use tools to repair and build;

How to talk with people - living with family - resolving conflicts in positive, non-violent ways - peers - dating;

Money - buying - checking and savings accounts - loans - credit cards - insurance investing;

The world of work - jobs and responsibilities - communicating on the job - wages and deductions;

Conditioning - martial arts - sports for fun and improvement;

Introduction to instrumental music - singing - dance - drama;

Movies & TV - know what you're watching;

Your future: college - careers - technical - other job possibilities.

Different cultures & People;

Games & Computers.

Young people learn through participation, enjoyment and repetition. With many of these areas, the information can be presented again or reviewed in different ways in the following years, and learned at increasingly sophisticated levels. These sessions, though, need to be activity-oriented. Playing games, visits to police, banks, museums, hospitals, store shopping would be good ways to for young people to learn. For most of the six hours a day that children attend school they are asked to sit. We adults can't do that! Today's students' learning must be much more visual and fast-paced.

The professionals and others who lead this continuing life-skills program throughout the year should be paid according to their expertise and the time

invested to help children prepare for their futures and improve their lives. Some of these experts might be in the areas of counseling/psychology, health, recreation, electrical, wood-working, auto mechanics, computers, music, art, museum docents, coaches, martial arts, business, landscaping, theatre - acting, directing, costume-making, lighting, dance, gymnastics and finance.

A program such as this would also help address the issues of child-care, latch-key children, and the concern with “Do you know where your child is?” Grants might be pursued as well as minimal fees assessed for those who would otherwise be paying much more for care, or not have adequate supervision for their children.

Improving our children’s learning, creating a better and more relevant educational process requires dedication, energy, thought, money and time. Learning and education is a long-term process, -- and should not be a series of threatening tests -- in which each person learns at his or her individual pace and has specific learning needs. We must not just consider what we want for our children, but also listen seriously to their perceptions of their needs and hopes. We must allow young people to participate and make choices about their own life education.

“What I hear I forget  
What I see I remember  
What I do I understand.”

(Chinese Proverb)