

The Supremacy of Curriculum



With recent American educational failures, the debate rages concerning how best to achieve academic success. The finger pointing has completed its circle from parents, students, funding and curriculum to teachers and administrators.

I researched some of the latest claims, and I want to share a trend I found in the statistics. But first a little background.

AP tests are used by the Advanced Placement program created by the College Board. In recent years the test has gained popularity. College readiness is a term used to describe how well a school prepares their students for college.

The data is never so clear cut. Take for example the proficiency scores below.

According to *US News Rankings*, Michigan's best public (non-charter) high school is Black River Public School in Holland. It has a gold award and is ranked third in the state. Two charter schools are rated first and second. The Rankings Scorecard for Black River reports AP Tested 84%, AP Passed 73%, Math Proficiency 37%, and English Proficiency 83%. Economically disadvantaged students make up 18% of the student body (853 students) and minority enrollment is 25%. College readiness is 66.5. Gender is equal, 50% male, 50% female.

The best ranked school in Michigan is Wellspring Preparatory School in Grand Rapids. It is a charter school. Their Scorecard reports AP Tested 100%, AP Passed 48%, Math Proficiency 38%, and English Proficiency 64%. Economically disadvantaged students make up 44% of the student body (413 students) and minority enrollment is 46%. College readiness is 70.3. Gender is equal, 50% male, 50% female. It also has a gold award.

The average state proficiency scores for Michigan are 30% for math and 40% for English. Michigan is a Common Core state.

Oklahoma is not a Common Core state. *US News* rated Edmond North High School the best in Oklahoma and gave it a silver award. The Rankings Scorecard reports AP Tested 58%, AP Passed 69%, Math Proficiency 88%, and English Proficiency 94%. Economically disadvantaged students make up 17% of the student body (2, 586 students, 48% female) and minority enrollment is 25%. Graduation rate is 95%. College readiness is 44.5%.

Memorial High School in Oklahoma is rated second. Its ratings are AP Tested 53% , AP Passed 76%, Math Proficiency 88%, and English Proficiency 91%. Economically disadvantaged students make up 25% of the student body (2,161 students, 49% female) and minority enrollment is 32%. Graduation rate is 94%. College readiness is 43.7%.

The average state proficiency scores for Oklahoma are 70% for math and 80% for English.

Minnesota is not a Common Core State. Its top charter school, according to US News, is Math and Science Academy. It received a gold medal. Its Scorecard reports AP Tested 83%, AP Passed 80%, Math Proficiency 94%, and English Proficiency 93%. Economically disadvantaged students make up 2% of the student body (478 students) and minority enrollment is 35%. Graduation rate is 91%. College readiness is 70.8%.

The average state proficiency scores for Minnesota are 40% for math and 50% for English.

It seems that of the schools listed above there are those that may not show college readiness for all their students. But the students that take the AP test score just as high or higher than those schools that do. And oddly, the proficiency scores are higher in the states that do not have Common Core.

A Pew Research report, *U.S. students' academic achievement still lags that of their peers in many other countries*, by Drew DeSilver, February 15, 2017, reveals the failure of Common Core and the teacher testing argument.

But America has not always failed at education. Many take it for granted that the curriculum a school chooses works. In the case of Common Core it was promised that it would. It focused on skills. And darn it, skill would make America smart again. It didn't. Perhaps it never will. In regard to students, skill does not equal motivated.

In regard to teachers, skill does not equal success. You can be a skilled race car driver. But if you're driving a junker, you aren't going to win any races.

If a curriculum is mediocre, the results will be mediocre no matter how hard teacher and student work.

In the past in one room schools, young teachers, many children themselves by today's standards, turned out students who were literate and became leaders. Mothers in log cabins taught their children to read, write and cipher. Read the letters of young men during the Civil War. These were not men with proficiency tests or college readiness scores. Poor, self-motivated learners became presidents.

What were the tools of their education? Rich, broad *content*. Content matters. Ideas matter. They engage and inspire.

I read my state's social studies lesson on Native Americans. It was produced to be compatible with Common Core for early elementary. What it was, was boring. The reading and analyzing skills were there. The facts were correct, mostly. (Horses arrived with the Spanish.) But the flavor of the culture is missing. If you really want to know about Native American life, pick a book written by a Native American author and read it aloud. You'll discover the language, dress, style of home, food and values effortlessly.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. agrees about the supremacy of content. In his article, *In Defense of Educators*, he talks about the importance of ideas and the failure of theories. Teachers are stuck with the theories handed them. I pity the teacher stuck with the social studies curriculum mentioned above.

I also know that unprepared feeling of being in a classroom of students the same age as my youngest brother, hearing the door click shut and seeing in tunnel vision the faces before me. A friend and older teacher said she wasn't prepared for the real classroom. Many teachers make the same complaint.

New teachers should not be penalized for learning. They should be supported by more experienced teachers. Collaboration among grade teachers would help build a knowledge/skill ladder where one teacher provides the foundation for the next to build on. Unity of purpose creates order and provides a plan.

Curriculum that uses real books, information in context, inspires curiosity and respects the learner is essential. A teacher who can help to build skills for the learner so they can meet these rich ideas and solve problems is appreciated.

Charlotte Mason said the mind feeds on ideas. Homeschooling is successful because it is not hindered by failing theories. It uses methods proven to be successful. It doesn't matter if the teacher is trained or not, if money is abundant or scarce, if the skin is black, brown or white on teacher or student. Content and attitude are key.