

WHY OUR SCHOOLS DON'T WORK AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

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Here are some facts from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, as reported by Regna Wood in the October 18, 1993 issue of *National Review*: "Though most of the 180 million adults in this survey have attended school for 12 years, over 96% (174 million) can't read, write, and figure well enough to go to college; two thirds (120 million) do not have the 'literary proficiency' to go to high school; and nearly a fourth (40-44 million) can't read. Some can sign their names. A few have learned to fill in the height, weight, age, and birthdate blanks on forms. But they can't really read." Why can't our schools teach their students to read, write, and compute?

Recently, I read two reviews of "Project Follow-Through," the world's largest and most expensive educational experiment. From 1968-1977, in an effort to discover more effective methods for teaching economically-disadvantaged children, the U.S. Office of Education spent *one billion* dollars to test the effects of 13 different models of education on the achievement scores of disadvantaged students. One model, "Direct Instruction," consistently outperformed the rest. Its students were first in reading, arithmetic, spelling, language, basic skills, academic cognitive skills, and positive self-image. They not only performed better than other disadvantaged students, but significantly better than *non-disadvantaged* students in the same sites today.

Direct Instruction is a highly interactive, practice-intensive, mastery-based teaching method. The teacher's instructions and demonstrations are carefully designed to minimize student errors. Students practice with immediate guidance and feedback from the teacher. The teacher evaluates students' performance as they practice. She knows immediately if one of her students is having difficulties, and thus she can provide help. Students practice until they master the skills they need to learn; the teacher does not leave anyone behind. The materials teach students to generalize. For example, students learn strategies that will allow them to read or spell any word, rather than simply learning to spell or read a list of selected words.

Almost twenty years have passed since Project Follow-Through, but with the exception of a small number of schools, most have not adopted Direct Instruction or other effective methods. Additional research has been done, documenting Direct Instruction's effectiveness with both gifted and learning-disabled children. Australian parents found that just 10 weeks of 15 minutes per day improved their children's reading abilities by one and one-half grades. And Direct Instruction, in combination with other nontraditional methods, is producing gains of two to four grade levels per

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year in the reading, language, and math skills of children said to have learning disabilities due to *attention deficit disorder* or *minimal brain dysfunction*. If Direct Instruction is so effective, why isn't it used by our schools?

Schools, like other institutions, make decisions based upon how they are funded. As MCI, the long distance company, likes to remind us, the average price of a telephone call has dropped by 50% since its creation. AT&T now has to compete with other long distance companies for its funding. As a result, we are bombarded with commercials and mail offers for new services, price discounts, and offers of frequent flyer miles. Or consider the car industry. When the U.S. automakers did not have to compete with foreign automakers, they produced cars of low quality. With foreign competition, U.S. automakers lost revenue as consumers switched to better quality imports. Now, because their funding depends on it, U.S. automakers have begun making higher quality cars. When the amount of money that an institution gets depends upon its price and quality of service, both price and quality improve.

But how about our schools? Unfortunately, their income does not depend upon how effective they are in teaching students. Further, changing the way they operate would be costly. Teachers and administrators would have to learn new skills. They would have to give up cherished assumptions about how students learn. More effective methods usually take more effort. Monies would have to be shifted from current projects to support the purchase of new materials, teacher training, and supervision. In short, adopting more effective methods would be highly disruptive. With no incentives and so many disincentives, why should we expect schools to adopt more effective methods?

Parents, business leaders, and taxpayers, you're the ones with the power to fix our schools because you're the ones who fund them. So, call, write, or speak to your state representative. Demand measures of the *gains* in reading, writing, and math skills. Don't vote for additional funding, unless it's contingent upon increased student achievement. Do vote for state legislature candidates that promise to hold schools accountable for their effectiveness.

Remember, it's your kids who can't read, write, compute, or think well enough to get a good job in today's high-tech economy. It's your employees who lack the skills to compete with the workers of other countries. It's your tax money that gets wasted.

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