Give Parents More Information

Matthew Chingos, Michael Henderson, and Martin West (“Can Citizens Tell a Good School When They See One?” features, Fall 2010) provide a valuable look at the criteria that Americans, especially parents, use when evaluating the schools in their community. While conventional wisdom, at least in some circles, holds that people judge schools on the basis of something other than academic quality—most odiously, the racial mix of their student body—here we have reassuring evidence that people evaluate schools on the basis of academics. Perhaps most importantly, we also see rigorous evidence that socially disadvantaged Americans are just as likely to rate schools on the basis of their academic profile as are people with high income and high education. This squares with my own experience. One need only speak with inner-city parents whose children are attending underperforming schools—as I have—to see that they are fully aware of what their children are missing. They know what a quality education is, and is not.

Lest we be complacent, however, remember that people can only evaluate schools based on the information they have. Currently, a simple Google search pulls up a wealth of information about student performance in one’s local neighborhood school, truly a revolution in transparency. However, that information is generally limited to math and reading. Clearly, these subjects are integral to a good education. But so are science, civics, and history. The evidence mustered by Chingos, Henderson, and West makes the case for ensuring that people have—to see that they are fully aware of what their children are missing. They know what a quality education is, and is not.

The fundamentals of history? Rarely do parents, or voters, have that information. And they should.

Math and reading are a start, but a well-rounded education calls for more.

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Middle-School Decline

Thank you for the interesting and informative article “Middling Middle Schools” by Jonah E. Rockoff and Benjamin B. Lockwood (research, Fall 2010). The authors found that in the specific year when students move to a middle school (or to a junior high), their academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests, falls substantially in both math and English relative to that of their counterparts who continue to attend a K–8 elementary school.

I am glad to see the findings of their research. When I was with the New York City Department of Education and responsible for our secondary-school reform strategy, we created models of 6–12 and K–8, where this was feasible. Our own research indicated that having fewer transitions would benefit high-need students.

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Equity and the Arts

There is much to appreciate in “Advocating for Arts in the Classroom” (features, Fall 2010). In the recent past, the central issue inhibiting a quality arts education for U.S. public school children has been an overemphasis on high-stakes testing. For too many policymakers, student achievement is defined solely by test scores in reading and math, which has led in turn to the disappearance of the arts, particularly in low-performing schools. Turning this around will require a well-crafted message that includes and significantly expands on the value of great art in and of itself.

But I disagree with Mark Bauerlein’s viewpoint on arts education advocates: we need more advocates, not fewer. For some principals, the spring concert may be what brings parents into the school building. For special needs students, the process and tools of the arts open up important new pathways of learning. For new Americans, the arts in the schools may provide the means to share their cultural heritage while celebrating a diverse citizenry. For others, it will be the discovery of Kandinsky. Arts education today is more than instruction: it is also a barometer of our willingness as a nation to provide equity through our public institutions.

I applaud Rocco Landesman for bringing his important message directly to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at their joint appearance at the Arts Education Partnership: “Arts exposure is fine, but unless students are
I agree with Mr. Bauerlein’s twin observations that arts education adherents need to go beyond the social/behavioral-rectification benefits of the arts and demand more rigor and an understanding of art’s context. Focusing solely on arts-specific practice has led the general public to look upon arts education as worthwhile only for those kids who want to be artists (e.g., “Glee-wannabes”), hence the current overemphasis on practitioner development. It also follows that there should be a better balance between self-expression and communication: expression is easy, effective communication more demanding.

Given the current educational climate, the rich value of arts in education has yet to be mined. According to [executive director of the Massachusetts Advocates for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities] Dan Hunter, who helped to draft the “Creativity Challenge Index” legislation recently passed in Massachusetts, there is no political imperative for arts education in this country—one. But there is a growing awareness that if we want kids to grow up and become capable adults they must develop 21st-century skills such as creativity, imagination, cross-cultural understanding, and an entrepreneurial mind-set. By definition, these are “arts” skills. By leveraging these skills, and capitalizing on the catalyst of emotional engagement (our stock on the shelf), we can bring about significant student achievement.

The challenge for us in the arts education community is to demonstrate how teachers can employ those very same skills in their teaching, whatever the discipline. The “habits of mind” inherent in the arts are not arts-dependent, but can be readily employed in other contexts. My colleagues and I have been discussing such an approach with Marc Hauser at Harvard, Ed Pajak at Johns Hopkins, and Jonathan Plucker at Indiana University. Our aim is to demonstrate these ways of thinking in terms that are reasonably accessible.

We will be giving a presentation on these challenges at the ASCD conference next March in San Francisco and hope to further this work in a week-long institute in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution next summer.
The Discovering Mathematics series is a high-school math curriculum of algebra 1, geometry, and algebra 2 content. The elementary- and middle-school math curricula used in Seattle schools are not part of the Discovering Mathematics series and are not published by Key Curriculum Press.

Additionally, Dunn writes, “Parents have filed a lawsuit against the wealthy Issaquah school district since its adoption of the Discovering series; the similarly wealthy Bellevue school district is also facing a possible lawsuit.” A lawsuit disputing the adoption of the Discovering materials in Issaquah has not been filed, and the Bellevue school district did not adopt the Discovering series; therefore, any lawsuit being considered would not involve the Discovering materials.

We also take issue with some of Dunn’s characterizations of the curriculum. For instance, he makes the assertion that there are “faddish ideas afflicting the Discovering series.” It is difficult to balance the term “faddish” with the facts that Discovering Geometry has been used in schools since 1989 and the three-year Discovering series has been available for 10 years. Since the materials have been used in all 50 states, by more than 1200 schools, for over 10 years, we think Dunn should reflect on what he considers a “fad.”

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Dunn responds:
If Mr. Ryan truly believes “pedagogical disputes are beyond the courts’ proper constitutional role and institutional capacity,” then his own company’s lawsuit against Washington’s Superintendent of Public Instruction appears quite peculiar. He is correct that the Discovering Series is for high school. The Seattle school district has been using a discovery-based math curriculum in the lower grades and clearly viewed the Discovering Series as an extension of those pedagogical choices.

Regarding Issaquah, I am delighted to hear that the parents reconsidered their decision and chose not to follow the litigious example of both Key Curriculum Press and the Seattle plaintiffs. Finally, whether discovery-based learning is faddish, I suppose, is in the eye of the beholder. Since mathematics and how best to teach it have been subjects of inquiry for at least two and a half millennia (see, for example, Socrates’s use of what could be called “direct” instruction in Plato’s Meno), 1989 seems fairly recent.