Plugging the Hole in State Standards

One Man's Modest Proposal

ILLUSTRATION BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Like other forward-looking organizations, the American Federation of Teachers believes that we need to have better state standards if we are truly going to improve K-12 education. I've earnestly stated that same view. That's no doubt why I've been invited to write on this subject.

I'm genuinely flattered. But after living with this question for more than two decades, my views have become so definite (some might say extreme) that I decided to conceive of this piece as a guest editorial where no one should think I am speaking for anyone but myself. That will allow me to speak my mind, which will I hope be more useful to readers than an attempt to find and express a consensus view on behalf of *American Educator* and the AFT on this controversial subject.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., is professor emeritus at the University of Virginia and author of many articles and books, including the bestselling Cultural Literacy *and* The Schools We Need. *He is a fellow of the Academy of Arts and Sciences and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation. His most recent book is* The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children.

The subject is controversial in part because some teachers do not like explicit subject-matter standards. In my own state of Virginia, some teachers are quite annoyed with me personally because many years back my writings influenced the Virginia Board of Education when they introduced the "Virginia Standards of Learning"—the much debated, often dreaded SOLs. But let me say to those teachers, and to other teachers, that the state did not pay attention to what my colleagues and I said back in 1988. We said that subject-matter standards and tests of them should be just two prongs of a four-pronged policy. Standards and tests needed to be accompanied by good teacher training in the subject matter specified in the standards and by good classroom materials that clearly indicate what to teach, but not how to teach it. The last two prongs have never come properly into existence in Virginia, nor to my knowledge in any other state. Moreover, the Virginia standards (not to mention the tests) are not nearly as good as they should be. Other state standards are even worse. No wonder there is such dissatisfaction!

But many teachers I have talked to have agreed that they would very much prefer to work in a more coherent system, one that ensured that students who entered their classrooms were ade-

quately prepared. In their great book, *The Learning Gap*, Harold Stevenson and James Stigler said that the biggest problem for teachers in American schools is not ethnic diversity but diversity of student preparation. It is the great variability of students' knowledge and skills that makes work so immensely draining for so many American teachers. To ensure that all the students are adequately prepared for each new class is precisely what the four-pronged program—good standards, good tests, good teacher training, and good materials—can accomplish. The point of departure has to be good standards. They determine the nature of the tests, of the training, and of the classroom materials.

Why don't we have good standards? I can answer that question if I'm allowed a brief historical digression. Strangely enough, until a couple of decades ago we had no state standards at all. The historical reasons for that also explain why they turned out to be vague and ineffective when we finally got them.

In 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published, the nation became alarmed by declining scores in reading and math, and the cry went out for academic standards to be set. But why were there no standards before then, and why did reading scores begin to decline in the 1960s, and remain at low levels to today? To find the causes of vast nationwide movements like that, covering tens of thousands of schools, hundreds of thousands of teachers, and millions of students, one has to go back further in time. In her illuminating account of American K-12 education in the 20th century, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, Diane Ravitch shows that the decline was the startling result of what had been a gradual process of takeover by child-centered theories starting early in the last century.

By the 1920s and 1930s, these child-centered theories dominated the ideas of education professors, and by the 1950s they dominated the ideas of the schools, sometimes in extreme forms such as the open classroom. The different versions of the new theories varied from an emphasis on inward growth (which emphasized things like unleashing a child's creativity) to an emphasis on social efficiency (which used schools to prepare students for definite vocations). But all versions had in common a child-centered emphasis and hostility toward the traditional academic curriculum. It was this second emphasis—the successful attack on the academic curriculum—that explains the absence of standards before *A Nation at Risk*.

The child-centered, anti-academic theories are usually labeled "progressivism." They presented themselves as big improvements over educational theories of the past, and in some respects they were—especially in the very early progressive schools at the beginning of the century when a new-found sympathy for childhood and for the child's interests were put into the service of delivering a solid academic curriculum that would produce good readers and writers and high-minded citizens. The strength of the progressive movement was its empathy with childhood. That has been its lasting contribution. Its fatal flaw was its blind faith that somehow the needed curriculum (whether academic or vocational) would arise from the child's nature under gentle guidance. Yet it is the character of the nation and the needs of the community, not the nature of the child, that determines the needed school curriculum.

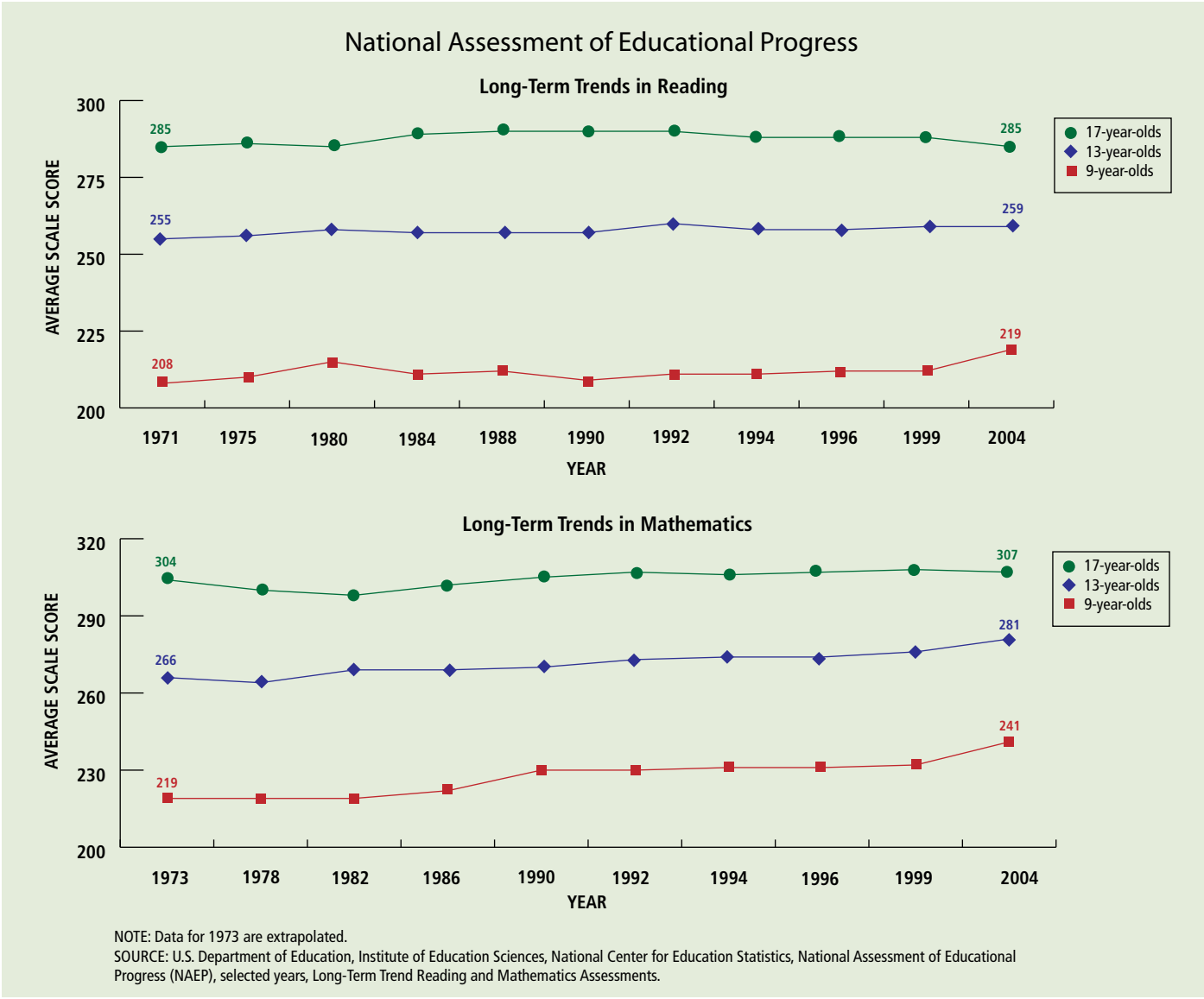
I've come to think that the most useful way to consider the theories that transformed and, in time, weakened American public education is not to call them by their self-proclaimed label "child-centered," but by their practical effect in diminishing the academic curriculum. The interest of the movement was focused less on the actual child, who often got lost in the various fads of the day, than on vigorously attacking traditional academic subjects. This attack was common to all forms and varieties of the new theories, as Ravitch has shown. I came to understand this point more fully when reading a 1939 talk by a brilliant opponent of the movement, Isaac Kandel:

> Rejecting ... emphasis on formal subject matter, the progressives began to worship at the altar of the child. Children [they said] should be allowed to grow in accordance with their needs and interests.... Knowledge is valuable only as it is acquired in a real situation; the teacher must be present to provide the proper environment for experiencing but must not intervene except to guide and advise. There must, in fact, be "nothing fixed in advance" and subjects must not be "set-out-to-be-learned"... No reference was ever made to the curriculum or its content.... The full weight of the progressive attack is against subject matter and the planned organization of a curriculum in terms of subjects.

It would take nothing short of magic for high academic achievement to come from students who have been deprived of a coherent academic curriculum.

The most fruitful way to think about the effects of our recent history on state standards and lack thereof is to focus on just this trait, this hostility to academics. It might seem odd to call the movement an anti-curriculum movement, since *something* in the way of a curriculum has to be going on to take up time in school. In that sense, every school has a curriculum no matter how fragmented or ineffective it might be. But the public believes reasonably (and I think rightly) that the school curriculum concerns subject matter—history, science, math, language, and the arts. Their view is supported by the dictionary definition of curriculum: "an integrated course of academic studies." Progressivism really was an anti-curriculum movement.

A very useful perspective on the recent history of our schools emerges when we understand that the chief educational movement of the entire 20th century, the movement that gradually came to dominate in our colleges of education and schools, has been an anti-curriculum movement. You can see how that might explain why there were no well-defined academic standards before *A Nation at Risk*, and why, when the new standards were created, they were highly vague. It also explains why we experienced the slide in academic achievement that led up to *A Nation at Risk*, for it would take nothing short of magic for high academic



NOTE: Data for 1973 are extrapolated.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), selected years, Long-Term Trend Reading and Mathematics Assessments.

achievement to come from students who have been deprived of a coherent academic curriculum.

Recently, at a state's request, I did a report on its language arts standards. What I found were standards like this:

> Students will comprehend, evaluate, and respond to works of literature and other kinds of writing which reflect their own cultures and developing viewpoints, as well as those of others. Use prior knowledge to extend reading ability and comprehension. Use specific strategies such as making comparisons, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, identifying the main ideas, and understanding cause and effect to comprehend a variety of literary genres from diverse cultures and time periods. Students will demonstrate a willingness to use reading to continue to learn, to communicate, and to solve problems independently.*

These empty guidelines could be copied and pasted in any grade level. (In fact, that is the way many state language arts guidelines are constructed.**) It's obvious that such standards offer no concrete guidance to teachers, test makers, teacher-training institutions, or textbook makers.

Above are two interesting historical graphs that not only indicate something about our lackluster achievement, but also hold a positive moral. As the graphs make clear, math has begun to recover, with substantial gains among 9-year-olds and encouraging gains among 13-year-olds. But reading has not (other than a slight boost among 9-year-olds, likely due to the recent push for phonics-based reading instruction). What is the explanation for the different performance in reading and math?

The basic reason that math achievement has begun to recover is that, under the influence of *A Nation at Risk*, starting in the late 1980s and the 1990s, state and district math standards and tests have slowly improved. They still have a long way to go,† but they

*These examples come from "language arts." The admonition for students to "reflect their own cultures" is an excellent example of the way in which the virtue of respecting everyone's background, admirable in itself, has simply displaced the school's understanding of its fundamental responsibility to help nurture and sustain an effective democracy by ensuring that all students share some common knowledge.

**See, for example, "Common Ground" by Heidi Glidden, this issue, pg. 13.

†See, for example, "What's Missing from Math Standards?" by William H. Schmidt, this issue, pg. 22.

are somewhat more specific and focused than they used to be. One reason that reading, by contrast, has *not* recovered is that language arts standards remain vague, and language arts textbooks are delivering a fragmented curriculum.

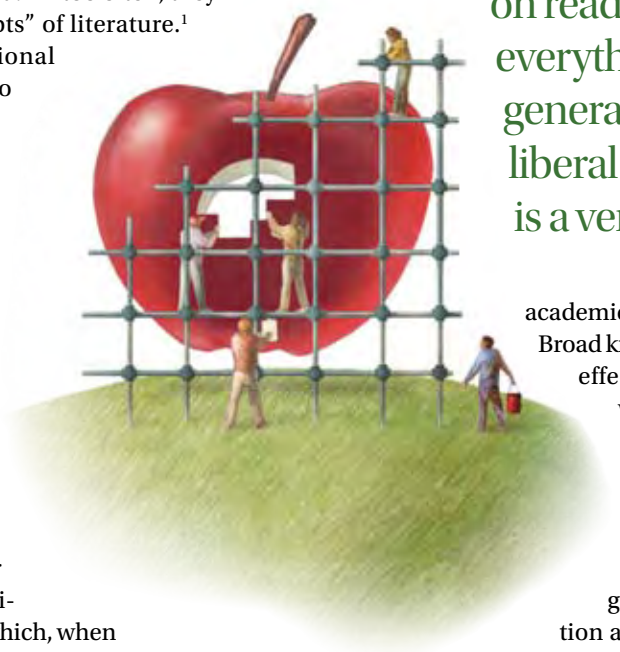
It is astonishing how hard it has become for an American school to deliver a coherent, cumulative curriculum in language arts, history, science, and fine arts over several years. The available textbooks have been created in a commercial environment that actually discourages a selective and coherent pattern of instruction that systematically builds necessary preparatory knowledge. Not only are basal readers and literary series typically compiled by committee with the aim of satisfying as many states' standards as possible, publishers have been so battered by right- and left-wing critics that they have long lists of topics and words to avoid. All too often, they resort to altering their "excerpts" of literature.[1] Literary quality and instructional coherence take a back seat to these market pressures. The excerpts are so disconnected and often so trivial that little of enduring value is learned in the literacy block.

Probably the greatest wastes of school time in early grades occur in this so-called literacy block. Young children certainly need instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, but that need not take up much of the block.[2] The bulk of the two- to three-hour block should be devoted to serious literature and nonfiction (which, when well planned, allows science and history to be taught in meaningful ways). But that rarely happens. Instead, schools pursue the futile hope that trivial stories and reading comprehension strategies will offer a shortcut around the broad general knowledge needed for verbal progress. During these long periods, at the freshest time of the day, little coherent knowledge is being conveyed.

Here are the titles of some typical stories upon which our children are practicing their how-to reading exercises—I list them in sequence from the first-grade table of contents of the best-selling reading program by Houghton Mifflin: *A Dragon Gets by*, *Roly Poly*, *How Real Pigs Act*, *It's Easy to Be Polite*, *Mrs. Brown Went to Town*, *Rats on the Roof*, *Cats Can't Fly*, *Henry and Mudge and the Starry Night*, *Campfire Games*, and *Around the Pond*. The long periods devoted to language arts are cognitive wastelands. I have no intention of blaming Houghton Mifflin (my own excellent publisher) for this misfortune. If its language arts series is the most popular one among schools, it is because Houghton is offering schools what they want.

This is where my modest proposal comes in. Verbal abilities are the chief factor in overall academic achievement. They even correlate to some extent with math, which is not surprising, since math, like everything else, has to be learned in part by hearing and reading words. The chief variable in determining verbal abilities is vocabulary size and range. Size is important, as they say. But range is important, too. It won't do just to know a lot of words in a few domains, for in order to understand a wide diversity of written and spoken utterances, you need to have broad general knowledge. In short, the best route to general academic achievement—high scores on reading tests and on everything else—is broad general knowledge. We now understand why a good liberal arts education really is a very practical thing to have. (The anti-

The best route to general academic achievement—high scores on reading tests and on everything else—is broad general knowledge. A good liberal arts education really is a very practical thing to have.



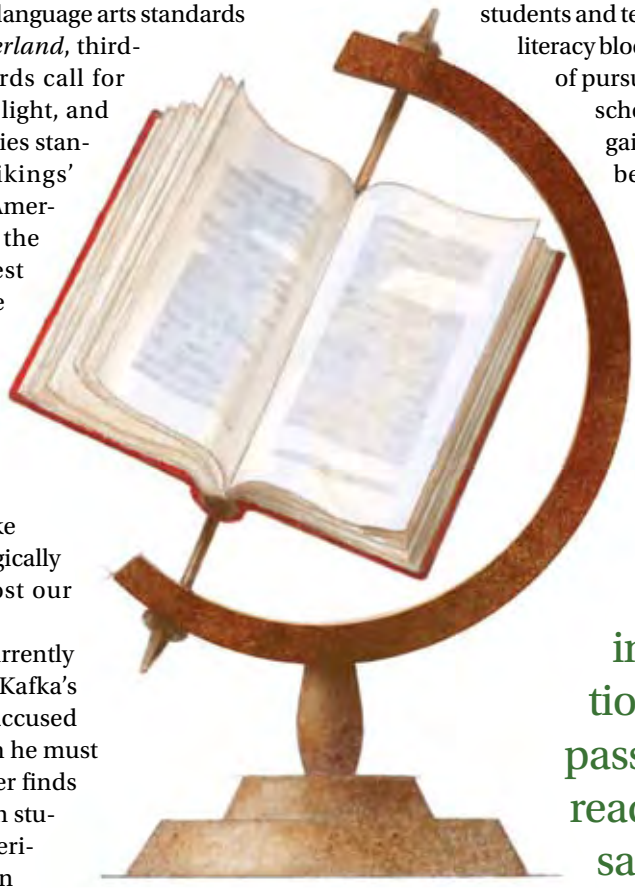
academic theorists were not so pragmatic after all.) Broad knowledge enables you to learn quickly and effectively.[†] And so it allows students to do what progressives prize above all else: learn how to learn. Broad knowledge is the key to comprehension, and it shows up very readily on reading tests.

The reading test is the instrument we use to assess the subject of "language arts," by which we chiefly mean fiction and poetry. But reading tests do not (and should not) restrict themselves to fiction and poetry. Therefore, language arts standards should not only specify literary works and techniques, they should also directly correspond to the content standards in other subjects, especially science and social studies. Why? Because *some of those non-literary topics are going to show up in passages on the reading tests*. We should certainly be explicit about the literary texts and concepts that we want children to know at each grade level, but the words and concepts of literature are just one component of language arts ability, one domain among the many that make up verbal skill. Verbal skill as a whole depends on general knowledge, not just knowledge gained from fiction and poetry. Once the mechanics of decoding are mastered, the key to reading ability *is* general knowledge, not the mastery of strategies like summarizing and finding the main idea. The usefulness of strategy instruction fades after a few classes, and begins to waste class time that could much better be occupied with interesting subjects.[§]

[†]To learn more about the benefits of background knowledge, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available online at **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/index.htm**.

[§]To learn more about strategy instruction, see "Ask the Cognitive Scientist" in the Winter 2006-07 issue of *American Educator,* available online at **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter06-07/CogSci.pdf**.

So my modest proposal is that reading tests should contain passages about specific topics taught not just in literature, but in all other subjects taught in that grade, except for math. For instance, if third-grade language arts standards specify *Alice in Wonderland*, third-grade science standards call for studying the speed of light, and third-grade social studies standards include the Vikings' explorations of North America, then passages on the third-grade reading test should cover those same topics. We would then have true curriculum-based reading tests instead of the mysterious tests we now have. This cunning device would make tests fairer and pedagogically more useful, and boost our students' abilities.



If third-grade language arts standards specify *Alice in Wonderland*, third-grade science standards call for studying the speed of light, and third-grade social studies standards include the Vikings' explorations of North America, then passages on the third-grade reading test should cover those same topics.

Reading tests are currently Kafkaesque. In Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K. is accused of something for which he must go on trial, but he never finds out what it is. American students face such an experience every year when they take reading tests, for they and their teachers are never told in advance what topics the reading passages will cover. Students who happen to have wide general knowledge (as those who happen to come from advantaged circumstances usually do) have an unfair advantage on any reading test that contains passages on topics that are not taught in school. Because content standards are currently vague and variable, the makers of reading tests have no idea what topics are being taught in school. Moreover, test makers are psychometricians; their job is done when they make tests that show certain technical characteristics. They aren't curriculum deciders, and they aren't experts in the psychology of reading. Those who *are* reading experts will tell you that, other things equal, a student will score much higher on a reading passage with a familiar topic than on a passage with an unfamiliar topic. From this fact alone, you can quickly see why general knowledge is such a big factor in reading comprehension. The broader one's knowledge is, the more likely it will be that the topic of a given passage will be familiar.*

Introducing curriculum-based reading tests founded on explicit content standards would mean that reading tests for a particular grade level would no longer be a shot in the dark for teachers and students. The subject matter on the reading tests would be taken from the specific subject matter for that grade level (excluding math). This would not only encourage tests that can be prepared for, it would also dramatically start raising students' reading scores and real-world reading ability. Here's why. Once students and teachers direct their efforts—especially during the literacy block—to learning a content-rich curriculum instead of pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of "reading strategies," school time will be used much more productively to gain knowledge. We go to school for so many years because it takes a long time to build up the vast knowledge and wide-ranging vocabulary we need. And, if we build it up cumulatively and effectively, year by year, we will become much better readers. But because the learning process is slow, it will only be in the later grades that this fact will be vividly apparent. In the lower grades, to ensure fairness as well as progress, we especially need to confine reading tests to school-based topics. With good standards and a good curriculum to match, general knowledge and reading ability build up remarkably.[3]

So, my focus on making language arts standards more specific ends up as a recommendation that we make *all* the grade-by-grade content standards more specific. And, it allows us to create more equitable reading tests. This would induce both a major change in our schools and a major improvement in the achievement of our students. It would start undoing the harm that—with the best of intentions—has been done. ☐

*See, for example, "What Do Reading Comprehension Tests Measure? Knowledge" in the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available online at **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/tests.htm**.

Endnotes

1 Ravitch, D. (2003). "Thin Gruel: How the Language Police Drain the Life and Content from Our Texts," *American Educator*, Spring 2003, p. 6-19.

2 Foorman, B.R. and Schatschneider, C. (2003). "Measurement of teaching practices during reading/language arts instruction and its relationship to student achievement," in Vaughn, S. and Briggs, K. (Eds.), *Reading in the Classroom: Systems for the Observations of Teaching and Learning*, pp. 1-30; Baltimore:BrookesPublishing. Also see Torgesen, J.K., Rashotte, C.A., Mathes, P.G., Menchetti, J.C., Grek, M.L., Robinson, C.S., et al. (2003). "Effects of teacher training and group size on reading outcomes for first-grade children at risk for reading difficulties," unpublished manuscript, Florida State University, Tallahassee.

3 Core Knowledge (2004). *How Do We Know This Works? An Overview of Research on Core Knowledge*. Available online at **http://coreknowledge.org/CK/about/research/eval12_2002.htm**.