

# CORE KNOWLEDGE SCHOOLS TAKE ROOT ACROSS THE COUNTRY



SURELY NOTHING is more central to what children learn than what we decide to teach them. Admittedly, middle-class children pick up a considerable amount of knowledge and skills from their “home curriculum.” But for them and, of course, much more so for the millions of other children who do not come from advantaged situations, what they learn—and with it their prospects for the future—are dependent to large degree on the formal learning embedded in the school curriculum. While a good curriculum is not the only element in school success, it is a prime one.

As central and seemingly obvious as this is, the curriculum framework in most school districts—to the extent that one is able even to put one’s hands on it—can only be characterized as an educational disaster. The typical district curricular “guidelines” or “scope and sequence” or whatever name they go by are vague; jargonistic; lacking in specific, concrete content; disparaging of facts and their interrelationships as the bedrock of knowledge and of knowledge as the bedrock of critical thinking; and sorely underestimating what children are capable of learning. Such a curriculum leaves teachers without guidance or structure—or the basis for professional collaboration. It leaves parents frustrated and often alienated from the public school system. And it deprives students of the opportunity for a world-class education for all.

Many districts and states have of late been working to improve their curricula. The results are uneven—some are quite good, some are quite awful—but the endeavor is a worthwhile one. Several years before these current efforts got under way, a growing network of schools under the banner of the Core Knowledge Foundation were breaking ground and moving ahead with a full-fledged, specific, sequenced, common, rigorous curriculum. There are now approximately 350 Core Knowledge schools in 40 states around the country. Inspired by the trenchant, insightful writings of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and his unwavering and courageous determination to focus attention on the problems with the curriculum and the need—particularly as a question of basic equity—to expose all children to a common core

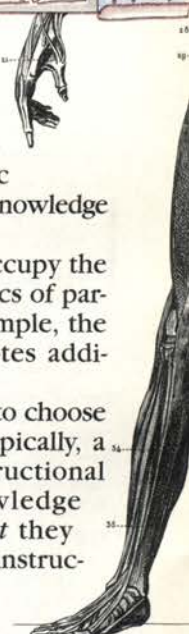
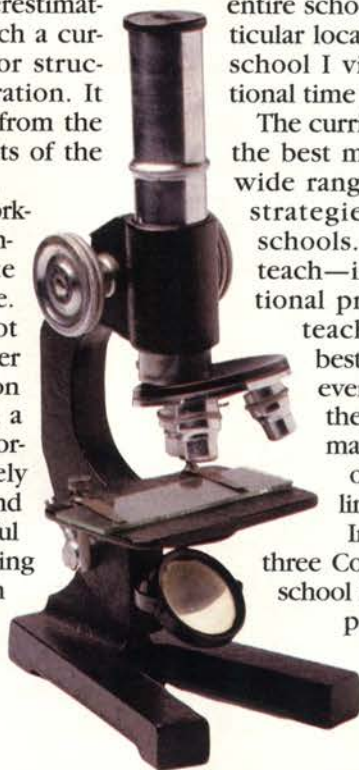
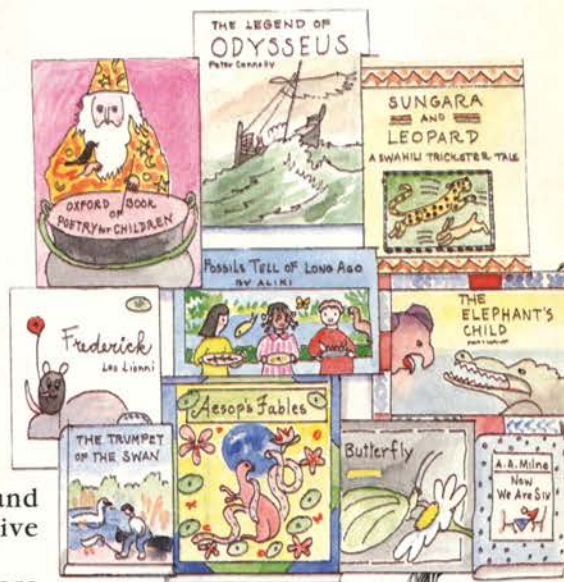
of rich subject matter, scores of teachers, parents, and administrators rallied to his common-sense ideas and worked to give them flesh.

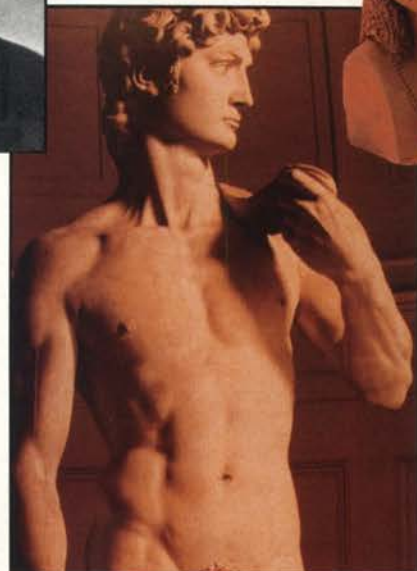
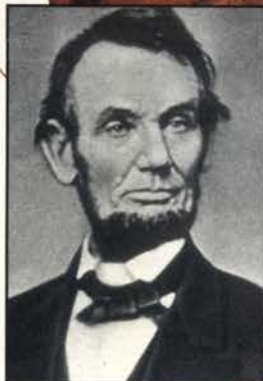
The Core Knowledge curriculum specifies what is to be taught, at each grade level, for each subject, grades kindergarten through six, with a draft under way for grades seven and eight. The curriculum includes time for the mastery of basic skills; indeed, it provides a body of interesting knowledge in which to ground skills instruction.

The curriculum is not intended to occupy the entire school day; there is time for topics of particular local and state interest. For example, the school I visited in San Antonio devotes additional time to the history of Mexico.

The curriculum set, teachers are free to choose the best method to present it, and typically, a wide range and healthy mix of instructional strategies are seen in Core Knowledge schools. Indeed, focusing on *what* they teach—instead of the latest fad in instructional process—appears to help teachers figure out *how* to best present the material. Whatever the instructional approach, however, the challenging array of knowledge to be mastered re-establishes the primary role of the teacher as teacher, not a sidelines “coach” or “facilitator.”

In the pages that follow, we report on three Core Knowledge schools: a middle-class school in Fort Collins, Colorado; an inner-city, predominantly Hispanic school in San Antonio, Texas; and a school of diverse, but mainly low-income, stu-





dents in Baltimore, Maryland.

Before moving on to those reports, a few additional comments on the two key elements of the Core Knowledge curriculum are perhaps necessary: its specificity and its knowledge-based richness.

### Specificity

As E.D. Hirsch and his associate John Holdren point out in the Introduction to the latest book in the Core Knowledge series, "Most curricula speak in general terms of vaguely defined skills, processes, and attitudes, often in an abstract, pseudotechnical jargon calling for children to 'analyze patterns and data'; or 'investigate the structure and dynamics of living systems'; or 'work cooperatively in a group.'" Teachers everywhere have similar guidelines ("students will demonstrate the ability to examine problems and proposed solutions from multiple perspectives;" "students should be able to generate original ideas") gathering dust in their cupboards, which is a good place for them since they don't tell you what you are expected to teach or your students expected to learn. Of course, such "guidelines" are not the beginning and end of the curriculum. A teacher is also likely to be handed a textbook—let's say, for fourth grade social studies. Of course, since the textbook publishers were trying to please all the various interest groups, there's much too much to be covered in one year. So, naturally, one fourth-grade teacher chooses certain topics, another chooses others. Different teachers also might add a topic they have a special interest in. Sometimes, it might happen that a third- and fourth-grade teacher have the same special interest; in science, for example, rain forests are currently a hot topic. Thus, the lack of specificity results in

myriad problems. When the three fourth-grade classrooms are learning different things, the fifth-grade teachers who have those students the following year can't count on everyone having a common body of knowledge and skills upon which she can build. As for the students, some are left with big gaps; others are bored with repetition ("the rain forest again").

And for the millions of children in our mobile society who move to a new school, a new district, a new city, or even a new state, the results are even more disastrous. They can't pick up where they left off because the lack of specificity means there's no commonality in the curriculum. Everyone left off at a different place.

The lack of specificity—and the resulting lack of commonality—in the curriculum also have a serious, but less obvious, impact on teacher interaction and teaching quality. When everyone is teaching about specified aspects of Ancient Egypt in first grade, or the families of instruments that make up an orchestra in third grade, or electricity in fourth grade, teachers begin to collaborate more, to share ideas, materials, tips and techniques, what works and what doesn't. Closets that were once teachers' private enclaves start opening up. At first, the sheer magnitude and newness of the topics means that everyone needs each other to help gather materials and plan units. But soon the effort takes on a life of its own, changing teaching from an isolated to a collaborative profession.

The other tremendous advantage of a specific cur-

riculum—specific goals that must be mastered at each grade level—is that it's much easier to monitor, intervene, and help students when they need it. The more vague the goals, the easier it is for students to fall through the cracks.

## Knowledge-based Richness and Rigor

There are two interrelated issues that need to be addressed here. First is the question of what young children should be learning, what they are capable of learning, what they are interested in learning. The second question has to do with attitudes toward factual knowledge. The Core Knowledge curriculum exposes children, early on, to interesting and demanding subject matter, and then builds on that, year by year, in a carefully developed sequence that reflects the basic cognitive principle that knowledge builds upon knowledge. When asked to give a flavor of the Core Knowledge curriculum, Hirsch once replied: "topics like: Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome; the Industrial Revolution; limericks, haiku, and poetry; Rembrandt, Monet, and Michelangelo; Beethoven and Mozart; the Underground Railroad; the Trail of Tears; *Brown vs. Board of Education*; the Mexican Revolution; photosynthesis; medieval African empires; the Bill of Rights; ecosystems; women's suffrage; the Harlem Renaissance."

This is an ambitious curriculum, rich in the important people, places, events, ideas and concepts, and artistic productions that have shaped our world. I would like to be able to explain why anyone would be against such a curriculum—or why, upon seeing it, wouldn't immediately embrace it—but I honestly don't fully understand why. Certainly one only has to visit a Core Knowledge school to see how excited the children are to explain to you what they are learning about. (Jose, the San Antonio first-grader pictured on the cover, was especially delighted to demonstrate to me how, in Ancient Egypt, which he was studying about the day I visited, certain inside parts were removed from the dead bodies before they were mummified; the brain, he showed me in some detail, was removed via the nostrils. All of these interesting parts were placed in a canopic jar, a word that *he* knew but *I* had to look up.)

Make no mistake about it, though, what Core Knowledge students are learning is not the standard fare in American schools. For anyone who doubts that, please examine pages 22-23. We compare some randomly selected pages from the new 1997 Houghton Mifflin second-grade social studies textbook, *Work Together*, with a list of topics from the *Core Knowledge Sequence* for second-grade social studies. To give you a flavor, in a typical two-page spread from the Houghton Mifflin textbook, printed on over-sized pages and using large type and lavish illustrations, the entire passage reads as follows:

### "Our Needs and Wants"

Needs are things people must have to live. We all need food to eat. We need clothes to wear. We need shelter, or cover, for protection. We also need love and friendship. Needs are the same for everyone all over the world.

Wants are important too. Wants are things we would like to have. Different people have different wants. What do you want?

Is there anyone who thinks children find this interesting? Or informative? Or useful? Vacuous, boring, and self-absorbed are the words that most immediately come to mind.

Is there anyone—adult or child—who wouldn't prefer to be engaged in the study of the following (and very partial) list of topics from the Core Knowledge second grade social studies sequence: "China: Huang He ['Yellow'] and Yangtze Rivers; Confucius; ancestor worship; Qin Dynasty; Great Wall of China; importance of silk; inventions, such as paper, seismograph; Chinese New Year."

The choice seems so obvious, and yet the textbooks like the one quoted above continue to be produced, bought, and used in large number. Why?

Perhaps part of the answer is a certain lack of excitement about, a kind of loss of faith in the value of knowledge.

In its place is, on the one hand, an emphasis on feelings, self-expression and immediate relevance; and, on the other hand, a disparagement of anything that smacks of "mere facts." An article last year in *Forbes* magazine described a high school literature class:

"The students pick a short story that relates to their ethnic backgrounds. A girl of Indian descent picks 'The Grass-Eaters,' a short story from the sub-continent, but she doesn't analyze the story. Instead she talks about her feelings, about how the story reminds her of a visit to her family's native village. Quite interesting and gossipy, but the proceedings do nothing to advance the children's ability to read or write English."

Or, as one veteran British educator described the situation in her country, "English at school now is less concerned with understanding and communicating the thought of the great masters than with the personal response of readers."

Perhaps the saddest moment recalled in his new book, *The Schools We Need*, took place when Hirsch was addressing a group of principals and administrators from around the country.

"In my first small-group session, an educator asked me what sorts of things I thought first graders should know. I mentioned, as they occurred to me, several examples of what first graders were learning in Core Knowledge schools: some fables of Aesop; some facts about Egypt, including mummies and the Nile; some elements of geography, like being able to find north, south, east, and west both out of doors and on globes and maps, as well as being able to identify the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and the seven continents. Immediately, one of the participants asked me if I really thought it was of any use whatever to a first grader to learn the seven continents? No one at the meeting was willing to defend the idea of teaching such facts to young children. Even if some might have privately favored doing so, no one dared to speak out. If dissenters were present, they were being powerfully inhibited by social constraints.

"An hour or so later, in a plenary meeting, I was asked by a curious teacher, intrigued by the idea of teaching solid substance in early grades (for some did seem interested in the general idea), whether I had enjoyed editing resource books for the early grades. I said, yes indeed, that I had learned a great deal. Next question: What had I learned that was most interesting? I pondered. Well, perhaps, the most exciting thing for me was at last to understand the relations between the earth and the sun during a year's orbit, and why, at the equator, spring and fall are the hottest seasons. Then, from another quarter, a dash of cold water was thrown on this momentary enthusiasm when an educator asked me if I thought that tidbit of information had made me a better person. Again, no one spoke up to defend teaching factual knowledge."

Much of the lack of enthusiasm for "factual knowledge" seems to come from the "factual" part of the phrase. Facts, it seems, are out of fashion. But as Hirsch, in full command of the relevant cognitive research, points out, "It is true that facts in isolation are less valuable than facts whose interrelations have been understood. But those interrelations are also facts (if they happen to be true), and their existence also depends entirely upon a knowledge of the subordinate facts that are being interrelated. Since understanding depends on facts, it is simply contradictory to praise understanding and to disparage facts.... Whether [facts] are dead and fragmented depends upon teachers and students, not upon the facts themselves, which are not only required for understanding but are sometimes immensely vital and interesting in their own right."

As for the famed "critical thinking," "problem solving," and other "higher-order skills," Hirsch again brings us back to the central role of factual knowledge: "Critical thinking is always predicated on relevant knowledge: One cannot think critically unless one has a lot of relevant knowledge about the issue at hand. Critical thinking is



not merely giving one's opinion. To counterpose 'critical thinking' and 'mere facts' is a profound empirical mistake. Common sense and cognitive psychology alike support the Jeffersonian view that critical thinking always depends upon factual knowledge." In other words, it's hard to think critically about something you don't know much about.

Nor, Hirsch points out, has the advent of the computer reduced "the need for students to have in their minds well-practiced habits and readily available knowledge. Quite the contrary," he writes, "the more one looks things up via computer, the more often one needs to understand

what one is looking up. There is no evidence that a well-stocked and well-equipped mind can be displaced by 'accessing skills.'"

**O**UR CHILDREN are hungry for knowledge—important, grown-up knowledge. E. D. Hirsch's great insight was to understand both the importance and attraction of factual knowledge and the necessity for a common curriculum and to translate these ideas into a specific, carefully sequenced, rigorous curriculum that could become the common ground upon which we continue this great experiment in democracy, a common ground upon which our students meet and grow and connect with the larger literate society they are preparing themselves to become part of. We may never completely level the playing field

made uneven by differences in family wealth, education, and stability, but we can give all kids a fighting chance at a full life by making sure that, *at school*, they are all exposed to a rich, common curriculum.

P.S. And if you're ever in San Antonio, stop by the Hawthorne school and have Jose—or any of the first graders—give you a lesson on Ancient Egypt. Unless you know more about canopic jars and sarcophagus coffins than I do, be prepared to learn something. □

—EDITOR