

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

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Why Johnny can't read — science books, that is

By Tom Horne

Friday, August 4, 2006

Romance is killing education. Let me explain.

People sometimes ask me, if there were just one book to recommend on education policy, what would it be? My response is *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* by E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

Hirsch is an interesting character. He blames the decline in the quality of public education on the 19th century British romantic poets. He started his career as an English professor and as an expert on those poets.

Romantics celebrate nature and prefer whatever is natural to whatever is artificial. Adopting this theory to education, as many progressive educators have done, children should be able to develop their education naturally and in whatever direction they prefer. Hirsch's point is that education is artificial and must be approached systematically.

Even more important is the distinction between acquisition of knowledge and acquisition of skills. The progressives teach that knowledge is not important because knowledge changes. What is important is that students develop the ability to learn new things and to think creatively. Hirsch teaches that the best way to develop the skill to learn new things and the best way to think creatively is to have a lot of knowledge as a basis for that learning and thinking. Knowledge is like Velcro: The more you have the more places you have to stick on new pieces of knowledge.

We have high school students who have problems reading. They can read sports magazines or *People* magazine, but they have trouble with science and social studies because they lack the necessary background knowledge to understand what they are reading.

As a state, we have been testing only reading, writing and math. This has resulted in less teaching of science, social studies and the arts in elementary schools.

What have we done to correct this?

The first task was to revise our standards, the detailed specifications of what teachers should be teaching. These can be viewed for any grade level and for any subject on our Web site, www.azed.gov.

In 2003, under state standards, our high school students did not learn in history about our Declaration of Independence, Constitution, founding fathers or the ideas on which this country was based. Under those standards, the last time they would have this in history would be in seventh grade when they were thirteen years old. In world history, the last time they would study the Greco-Roman basis for Western civilization was in the sixth grade when they were 12 years old. The first task was to reform the high school history standards, and the state board did this in the summer of 2003.

The next step was to adopt more content-rich standards in science, so that our students would learn more, starting in kindergarten and going all the way to 12th grade. This was accomplished in May 2004. A richer set of arts standards was also adopted this year.

By exposing the students at a young age, these subjects have greater resonance for the students later on when they are old enough to absorb the subjects in depth.

On our AIMS reading tests, a majority of our reading items are "informational text" (science, social studies and the arts) as opposed to "narrative text" (stories). Schools that want their students to do well on their reading tests must have their students become accustomed to reading science, social studies and the arts, and not just stories. But this incentive has not been strong enough.

The task now is to effectively implement the new content-rich standards. We don't want to overburden our elementary school teachers. Rather than pushing for additional time for science and social studies on top of what they are already doing, we want to help them incorporate informational text into their reading class. We will be suggesting to the teachers substitute passages in science, social studies or the arts, in place of some of the stories appearing in their text books.

Statewide science tests will be required by 2008 by federal law. The state will need to consider doing the same for social studies. To some extent, "what is tested is what is taught." The state will, therefore, need to consider social studies tests in addition to science tests and statewide end of course tests in high school to broaden the focus on reading, writing and math.