

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part Nine

Education Reform from the Bottom Up

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By Lynn Stoddard, with Introduction by Darla Isackson

Introduction

Soon after I began my education series I heard from Lynn Stoddard, a retired educator who is actively seeking education reform. I ordered his book and greatly enjoyed it. Recently he sent me a booklet (a summary of his ideas), which he is attempting to distribute widely. I think it is excellent and asked his permission to submit it to Meridian. They loved it too and agreed to post it.

Although reform of the public schools is not likely to happen quickly, I believe Brother Stoddard's ideas can be instantly applied in our family home evenings, home schools and home school co-ops. Thankfully in many cases his guidelines and major suggestions are already in place in our homes, as they should be.

It is entirely possible to apply them in private schools and charter schools also – where bureaucracy and federal mandates do not rule. I see his ideas as an extension of gospel instruction, and totally congruent with gospel principles. Read on and see if you don't agree.

School Reform from the Bottom Up

The purpose of this booklet is to:

1. Introduce a better goal for public education, one that allows for teachers to perform as professionals and for parents to be full, equal partners with teachers.
2. Provide six principles for teachers and parents to use in charting a course for their own schools.

Note: Years ago, Edwards Deming tried to persuade American car manufacturers to listen to the suggestions of workers on the assembly lines as a way to make better cars. Deming's ideas were rejected in our country, so he went to Japan, where his ideas were embraced. As a result, Japan started making the highest quality cars in the world. The U.S. is still trying to catch up.

At the present time, the public education system in America has been fashioned by a hierarchy of powerful politicians and high profile business executives, who met in "summits," to reform education. Educators were not invited to the meetings. Is there a lesson here?

A Better Goal for Education

The main goal and purpose of public education in America has always been *student achievement in curriculum*. Each state requires teachers to teach a core curriculum, measure accomplishment, and signify student learning with grades. Over many years our culture has become so obsessed with grade-point averages we have lost sight of why we are using them, and student achievement in curriculum has become a false goal, an end in and of itself.

Why does our culture cling so tenaciously to this goal? Is there not a better reason for having students learn subject matter content? What would happen if teachers were to employ curriculum for a higher purpose?

Years ago, while I was serving as principal of Hill Field Elementary School in Davis County, Utah we discovered something that may be destined to completely change the nature of public schooling in America. In interviews with thousands of parents, over several years, teachers were surprised to learn of three needs that parents felt were more important to them than the need to have a child achieve in curriculum.

First, parents wanted us to respect children as individuals, to pay attention to each child's special needs, and help youngsters develop their unique talents and abilities. Second, they wanted children to increase in curiosity and passion for knowledge – they wanted children to “fall in love with learning.” And third, parents wanted us to help children learn how to express themselves, communicate and get along.

The priorities were so consistent with nearly every parent that we surmised these may be the core needs of people in every culture – the need to know who we are (identity), the need for knowledge (inquiry), and the need for respect and love (interaction).

With this insight we adopted a school mission to *develop great human beings who are contributors – not burdens – to society*. We established three master goals that reflected the parent priorities. They came to be known as the three dimensions of human greatness.

Three Dimensions of Human Greatness

1. **Identity** – Help students discover who they are and develop their unique gifts, talents and abilities to form a vision of personal worth as *contributors* to society.
2. **Inquiry** – Expand curiosity, hunger for knowledge, and help students learn how and where to search for truth.
3. **Interaction** – Help children form healthy relationships and develop powers of expression and thoughtful, caring communication.

What happens when we change the goal of education? What happens when we aim for and assess student growth in the dimensions of greatness? What happens to curriculum? Here comes the exciting part. Curriculum changes, from being a boss over parents and teachers, to the role of servant. Subject matter content, *curriculum*, becomes a flexible tool, in the hands of teachers and parents to help students grow in identity, inquiry and interaction.

With identity as the first goal, we switch from trying to standardize students, to helping students discover and develop their unique sets of talents, gifts and abilities – we celebrate and nurture people as they were meant to be – unique individuals.

When we change the goal of education, teachers are energized to be able to do what they were trained for – act as professionals. Instead of being slaves to an imposed curriculum, teachers use their knowledge, training and creativity to meet the diverse needs of students. Curriculum becomes a tool rather than a goal. This kind of accountability weeds out poor teachers and attracts good ones. Poor teachers, who must rely on a canned curriculum, soon leave. This opens the door for the brightest and best people to enter. When teachers are respected and trusted to have control of curriculum, teaching becomes a true profession that attracts like the professions of law and medicine.

A Different Focus

When parents and teachers unite to fervently focus on helping students grow in identity, inquiry, and interaction, their brains begin to create strategies and curriculum for accomplishing the goals. It's mental magic. Among other strategies, the teachers at Hill Field School and Whitesides Elementary invented the "great brain project" to encourage inquiry, the "shining stars" talent program to develop identity, and the "school post office" to stimulate interaction. *We found that students learned reading, writing and math better when basic skills were taught for the purpose of helping students grow in the dimensions of greatness.*

Teaching for student inquiry causes much of public education to change. It changes the way teachers interact with students, it changes the way parents are involved, and most of all, it changes student learning. We found that *knowledge obtained from student inquiry is deep and enduring, while imposed learning is shallow and temporary.* In traditional education, students usually learn enough to pass the test and forget it soon after the test is over.

When we change the goal of public education, we will discover how far we have underestimated human potential. Children, parents and teachers are much greater than we have supposed. With a new goal we can nurture the compassionate genius in every person.

Do you know why our culture does not regard public school teaching as a profession? Can you see what happens when teachers are allowed to work with parents and make decisions about what curriculum is best for each student? Teaching will not become a profession until we change the goal of education.

The following principles can serve as your guide:

Six Principles of Genuine Reform

1. Value and nurture positive human diversity. (PHD)

This principle is the opposite of futilely trying to make students alike in knowledge and skills. It supports a different goal – human greatness. So far, many millions of people have been cheated from developing their unique talents, gifts and abilities – their greatness – because our public school system has so tenaciously focused on standardizing students. The "PHD Principle" calls for us to nurture people as they are, as individuals with unlimited potential. Instead of aiming to correct children's deficiencies – their weaknesses – this principle calls for teachers and parents to focus on each child's individual assets.

When we focus on assets, we give children courage to recognize and want to overcome deficiencies.

It's extremely important that every student find something in which s/he can excel. Some children have the gift of language, some the gift of mathematical reasoning, some art, some music, some human relations, some mechanical understanding, and some extraordinary physical ability. With this view there is no subject discipline that is more important than any other. We support children in trying to find what they are good at by giving many choices and supporting their investigations.

2. Draw forth latent potential.

"The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose, what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and only he knows the key to his own secret." Emerson

The second principle of genuine reform calls for a different kind of teaching than most of us experienced in public school classrooms. When student achievement in curriculum is the goal, a state-sanctioned curriculum is usually imposed on teachers to impose on students. This results in teaching as telling, instructing, and showing students what they must know and be able to do. This view holds that the knowledge is in teachers' heads, or in textbooks, and must be transferred to the heads of students.

This second principle, *draw forth potential*, starts with a different premise. The knowledge necessary for learning is already in the heads of students and must be drawn out. Personal knowledge comes from making connections between what we already know and new encounters with information or events. Unless we see a connection – build a relationship between what's inside and what's "out there" – understanding will not occur. Drawing forth is the opposite of "pouring in." It's a different kind of teaching that draws forth the knowledge already in the heads of students and helps them see connections with new information.

Love is the main force that allows students to reveal themselves to teachers and parents. When we love enough to listen – really listen – to the needs of each individual person, we basically change roles. The child becomes the teacher and we become learners. Love is the power that values and draws forth the unique greatness of each child.

3. Respect Autonomy

"The human will, that force unseen, The offspring of a deathless Soul, Can hew a way to any goal, Though walls of granite intervene."

James Allen

The biggest obstacle to genuine reform of education may be the belief that students must be compelled to learn. The traditional system of compulsory education – compulsory learning – removes from students the right and responsibility to decide what, where, when and how they will learn. When we steal a person's freedom we steal his most precious possession.

The third principle for changing public education, *respect autonomy*, is a self-evident truth. We know that human beings are born with freedom of thought and are thus responsible for their own thoughts and actions. Most dictionaries define autonomy as "the right of self-government, personal freedom, and freedom of the will.

Plato, the great ancient philosopher, said, "*Knowledge acquired under compulsion obtains no*

hold on the mind.” If this is true, why do many teachers insist on giving students assignments, requirements and homework?

To accept the notion that students will learn best when compulsion is removed may be one of the biggest tests for parents and teachers. We help students harness their power of will when we provide choices along with the freedom to succeed or fail and profit from being responsible for their own self-designed learning.

4. Invite Inquiry

Imposed learning is shallow and temporary. Learning from personal inquiry is deep and enduring.

Every person is born curious. Each one has a built-in drive to make sense of the world and his or her place in it. This condition makes it easy to *invite inquiry*. Inquiry is the natural thing we were born to do. Unfortunately, the state-imposed curriculum takes a deadly toll on inquiry soon after children start school.

We can keep inquiry alive by helping children learn to value good questions more than good answers. As parents and teachers we can best *invite inquiry* through example. We can find the “curious child” within us and show children how exciting it is to learn how to ask insightful questions. Because most of us went through a system that valued sponge-like behavior more than octopus-like seeking of knowledge, our curiosity took a big hit. We will need to exert some effort to get back what was lost. We can learn again to look with curious eyes and wonderment. Every person, place, thing or event, no matter how commonplace, is loaded with new information for our brains to chew on. If we will ask the 5 *W* questions (what, why, who, when, where) and one big *H* question (how), we can show children that their curious natures are not in vain.

5. Support Professionalism

Educating for Human Greatness changes public and home teaching into a profession wherein teachers are not only allowed, but encouraged to make creative decisions about what conditions and curriculum are best for each child in their care. They are freed from the tight grip and control of politicians and curriculum experts and their imposed curriculum. Curriculum changes from boss over parents and teachers to the role of servant. Subject matter content is no longer taught as separate disciplines, but is merged to help learners build personal meaning and knowledge. For this to happen, teachers and parents must be given control of curriculum for each child in each class – which, in turn, happens when we change the goal of education.

6. Unite as Partners

Growing greatness is an endeavor that home, school and church are all responsible for. In this booklet and the larger book from whence it comes, we confine ourselves to what happens when homes and schools – parents and teachers – unite their efforts, each doing what they do best.

Evaluation and Assessment

Our society is obsessed with numerical measurement. It’s the attitude that has kept teachers’ noses to the grindstone trying harder and harder to do the impossible task of standardizing students. With *educating for greatness* comes a different, but equally valid kind of assessment. We find ways to assess what we aim for – student growth in Identity, Inquiry and Interaction.

These dimensions are best fostered when we help students learn how to evaluate their own work.

A Final Reminder

When we fervently focus on helping students grow in greatness, we are satisfying three deep human yearnings or needs:

· The yearning to know who we are. (Identity) · The yearning for truth and knowledge. (Inquiry) · The need to feel love and show love to others.(Interaction)

These needs can be expressed as human powers:

Identity – I know who I am and can sense my unlimited potential.

Inquiry -- I am in charge and responsible for my own learning and behavior.

Interaction – I love and respect every member of the human family, as well as myself.

Integrity – A Fourth Dimension of Greatness

"This above all: to thine own self be true,

and it must follow, as the night the day,

thou cans't not be false to any man " Shakespeare

This booklet has presented a philosophy of education that, in many respects, is the exact opposite of what the government is pressuring teachers and parents to accept and follow. Now it is up to you to decide what is true and which path to follow. You have the power of your own free will. The author pleads with you to use it. Your integrity may call for you to stand up for the needs of children rather than the needs of misguided politicians.

"Never doubt that a small group

of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

Margaret Mead

Accountability

Teachers should be held accountable for doing things that are possible, not for standardizing students

About the author

Lynn Stoddard is a veteran of more than 50 years in public education as a teacher, elementary school principal, and parent of 12 children who all graduated from the public school system.

He is the author of three books around the theme, "growing greatness," as well as numerous articles for newspapers and educational journals.

Lynn lives in Farmington, Utah with his wife of over 57 years. He can be reached at lstrd@yahoo.com. He welcomes comments and suggestions for improving, expanding and "spreading the news" about "educating for greatness."

About his book

Stoddard's latest book, *Educating for Human Greatness*, was published last year by Holistic Education Press. You can go to www.great-ideas.org/Stoddard.htm to read the first chapter and learn more about the six pivotal principles for reversing the direction of public education. Then you can decide if you want to join the crusade to reform education from the bottom up.

What others are saying

I just want you to know that I have not been so impressed with an education book since Summerhill changed my teaching.

Educating for Human Greatness is wonderful. I cannot applaud you enough. It is so packed full of marvelous philosophy, examples of excellence in education, enthusiasm, and adventures that I had to let you know: you wrote a masterpiece.

Dr. Emanuel Bernstein, Psychologist

Lynn Stoddard "gets it." He explains in simple, clear language why the "standards and accountability" education reform effort not only isn't reforming education, it's rapidly making a bad situation worse.

Stoddard's vivid examples of what's possible when schools honor students' individual differences, and of the costs of treating them all alike, make a powerful case for abandoning the popular but simplistic education reform prescriptions of high-profile leaders of business and industry.

*Everyone who has an interest in educational quality - students, teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, editors, politicians, and anyone else interested in the future of America - should read *Educating for Greatness*.*

Marion Brady, Retired Educator

Author
of "A Primer for Education Reformers."

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I

was more than impressed with the article you sent me. All parents need to be aware of the principles you teach. I want to share your ideas on a wide scale because they are so valuable, not just run off a few copies and pass them around.

Darla Isackson, Parent, Author

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