THE Center for Education Reform

10th anniversary

Best Bets

Education Curricula That Work

For several years, a call has gone out — from parents and teachers alike — for higher standards and better curricular offerings. In many cases that call has been heard; standards across the country have become increasingly rigorous. Unfortunately most curricula designed to help students reach higher standards have not been so impressive. Filtering through the scores of programs that exist can be confusing. Good programs are out there, and finding these good programs can be easy if you have some basic guidelines to follow. Here are some tips, as well as a guide to the current "Best Bets" of strong, proven education programs for kids.

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MULTI-SUBJECT PROGRAMS

What to Look For

Substance and rigor. These are the most important components of good curricular programs. Strong programs teach facts, figures and knowledge, and develop hard student skills like reading, writing and the ability to calculate. For many decades American schools have strayed from these missions, and though there is progress getting back to what is most fundamental, there is still a long way to go. The problems are numerous, but the deepest impediment to all children having substantive, rigorous programs lies within an ideological battle that started decades ago:

> "… the thinking that unites the variations of Progressive education is still with us today. Standards that are both demanding and explicit are called 'elitist' and are therefore difficult to implement. Nonacademic courses are on the decline, but nonacademic content is being infused into traditionally academic courses."
>
> *Our Schools & Our Future… are we still at risk?*
> by the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution

What distinguishes the comprehensive curricula recommended here from their competition is that they have avoided the temptation to offer courses that are rigorous in name only. Instead, these programs challenge students and provide them with all the knowledge and abilities they need to excel.

CER's "Best Bets"

The Core Knowledge Sequence

Description: Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. believes that there is a body of knowledge with which people must be familiar in order to be "culturally literate." On the individual student level, Hirsch has found that learning is most effective when topics are tackled in-depth. These convictions underscore the Core Knowledge Sequence, a curriculum that approaches learning as a cohesive whole, not isolated subjects and grade levels. The Core Knowledge Sequence integrates all subjects, from reading, to history, to math, providing students with the depth they need to understand concepts about which they are reading, as well as the knowledge necessary to understand the culture in which they live. No grades or subjects in Core Knowledge are disconnected; when a fourth grader is reading Arthurian legends in language arts, he is also studying the Middle Ages in history, art, and other classes.

Reading note: While the Core Knowledge Sequence is an excellent tool for teaching reading comprehension, it does not provide explicit phonics instruction. However, pairing it with any of the phonics curricula mentioned in the reading section below will be very effective. In addition, it is officially coupled with the Baltimore Curriculum Project. You can find lesson plans on their web site at www.cstone.net/~bcp/.

Publisher: Various, but all publications are available on the Core Knowledge Foundation's web site.
Grades: K-8
Web Site: www.coreknowledge.org

K12

Description: K12 offers an excellent computer-based curriculum covering language arts/reading, math, science, history, art, and music. K12's web-based format allows students to work at their own pace, which is impossible at most brick and mortar schools. But it doesn't just teach on the computer; K12 employs supplemental materials in all subjects, including textbooks and work sheets; "manipulatives" like blocks for early math instruction; goggles, test tubes and lots of other equipment for science; and tambourines, slide whistles and CDs for music instruction. Most importantly, K12 applies scientifically proven teaching methods, like phonics in reading, and math programs that emphasize math's concrete underpinnings and develops students' ability to add, subtract, multiply and divide – without calculators.
Publisher: K12
Grades: Currently K-5, eventually expanding through grade 12.
Web Site: www.k12.com/curriculum/subjects/language

READING

What to Look For

The key to a good reading program is logical progression – building ability like a house, from the foundation up. In reading, the foundation is broadly called **phonics**; teaching students to identify the sounds of letters and letter combinations, and how these sounds are represented in written language. To be effective for most kids, a reading curriculum *must* include a major phonics component. True, some children are able to translate written language into the language they hear and speak without phonics instruction, but research shows that they are a small minority.

Once phonetic fluency is achieved, students must develop their ability to comprehend large passages of text. Like phonics instruction, developing reading comprehension is a logical process, based on the idea that children's ability to understand text is driven largely by their knowledge of the concepts the text discusses. An extreme example illustrates this: most adults can read the words contained in a graduate-level physics book. Few, however, can comprehend what they are reading because they have no understanding of the concepts on which it is based. Simply: it takes knowledge to gain knowledge. The following are exemplary programs that meet the criteria that produce the best results for students.

CER's "Best Bets"

SRA Open Court Reading 2002

Description: This program, which typically boosts reading scores by 10 to 20 points in the first couple of years after implementation, combines explicit phonics instruction with challenging reading comprehension. Open Court's greatest accomplishment: launching previously dismal first grade reading scores in Los Angeles past the national average after only one year of use.
Publisher: McGraw-Hill Ryerson
Grades: K-6
Web Site: www.sra-4kids.com/index.php/p1/cproduct

SRA Direct Instruction

Description: Like Open Court, this program uses a combination of explicit phonics instruction and reading comprehension lessons. However, it is different in an important way: Direct Instruction (DI). DI is a fast-paced, highly structured teaching method that has gained fame for its ability to bring children who have fallen behind their peers back up to grade level – and beyond. It cuts out the "fat" found in many curricular models. SRA's is the only DI curriculum officially approved by the Association for Direct Instruction.
Publisher: McGraw-Hill Ryerson
Grades: K-12
Web Site: www.sra-4kids.com/product_info/direct

Saxon Phonics and Spelling K-3

Description: Published by a company that gained national notoriety for math curricula designed around a "building blocks" approach, Saxon's phonics program does the same thing for reading. The Saxon series of textbooks focuses on phonics and is designed to supplement other reading programs, like Core Knowledge.
Publisher: Saxon Publishers
Grades: K-3.
Web Site: www.saxonpublishers.com/school/phonics/

The Riggs Institute

Description: This non-profit company offers a reading curriculum with an intensive phonics focus and a direct instruction approach. The Institute's program is based on the work of Dr. Samuel T. Orton, and traces its efforts in reading education back nearly 120 years. The Institute uses literature to supplement its phonics program, but does not specify what children will read. Instead, the students choose the topics and books in which they're interested, largely from selections recommended by the Core Knowledge Foundation.
Publisher: The Institute publishes its own curricular guides, in addition to working with other publishers. A full catalog is available on the Institute's web site.
Grades: K-3, although it's used at levels up to high school for remedial work.
Web Site: http://www.riggsinst.org/index.shtml

MATH

What to Look For

Just like reading, math instruction is most effective when it works from the foundation up. That means students must first be able to add, subtract, multiply and divide – without a calculator. Only then can they move on to other mathematical functions. Just as readers must have mastered phonics to understand large reading passages, students must be proficient in basic arithmetic before they can tackle tougher mathematical concepts.

Traditional math advocates caution consumers about buzz phrases such as a "higher-order thinking," "conceptual understanding," and "solving problems," says Mathematically Correct, an organization of parents, educators, mathematicians and others dismayed by the poor state of math instruction in the United States. "It neglects the systematic mastery of the fundamental building blocks necessary for success in any of these areas … they shun things like algorithms and repeated practice." The following programs have one thing in common: they stress teaching the basics, without calculators, and their lessons build logically on concepts already taught.

CER's "Best Bets"

Saxon Math

Description: Though Saxon's reading program is also on the list, it is in math that the company made its name. Actually, the name comes from the company's founder, John Saxon, who in 1979 started publishing textbooks designed to teach new math concepts while constantly reinforcing old. That constant reinforcement is the hallmark of the Saxon curriculum, as is producing textbooks that focus on skills, not pretty pictures, calculator use, or group work.
Publisher: Saxon Publishers
Grades: K-12
Web Site: http://www.saxonpublishers.com/school/math/index.jsp

Progress in Mathematics

Description: In the late '90s, the state of California came to a realization: its math scores were awful, and it needed new standards. In 1999 it adopted rigorous new standards that aimed to have every child prepared to learn algebra by the eighth grade. Of course, new standards required new curricula capable of meeting them. One of the best is *Progress in Mathematics*, which in a comparison available from Mathematically Correct, even beat Saxon in several areas. Where it especially stood out was in its mathematical reasoning content.
Publisher: Sadlier-Oxford
Grades: K-6
Web Site: http://www.sadlier-oxford.com/teacher/teachermathindex.html

Singapore Math

Description: In 1995, eighth-graders in the tiny nation of Singapore finished first in the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). In 1999 they repeated the feat. In contrast, the U.S. finished in the middle of the pack both times. Clearly they're doing something right in Singapore — they're stressing fundamentals to an extent not seen in U.S. programs. Singapore math starts by introducing first-graders to counting using blocks and pictures; teaches second grade students multiplication and division; and, by fourth grade, students are learning simple algebra. Most importantly, Singapore Math focuses on quick, mental calculations – students don't even see a calculator until the seventh grade.
Publisher: Various, but there is at least one easily accessible distributor of Singaporean textbooks in the U.S.
Grades: K-10
Web Site: http://www.singaporemath.com/

HISTORY

What to Look For

The best programs are built on this conviction: the study of history should be about learning hard data - dates, names, events - especially in the pre-high school years. After that students can begin to master "critical thinking" and other higher-order historical analyses. To try to do that before students have mastered the figures, years and events of history is a recipe for failure. After all, how can a student be expected to analyze, say, the causes of the Civil War, if he thinks it took place in the 1950s, involved Mexico and the United States, and featured the exploits of "Old Hickory"?

CER's "Best Bets"

Hillsdale Academy

Description: The Hillsdale curriculum is fact and knowledge intensive. However, the most important thing about the Hillsdale model is that it does not use textbooks, which in recent decades have become notable mainly for their lack of depth and tendency to reshape history. In fact, a recent analysis of social studies textbooks being considered by Texas determined that all the books "have bleached history from the pages."
Publisher: Hillsdale has no history curriculum for sale. Instead it provides its entire curriculum, complete with an exhaustive reading list for each grade, on its web site.
Grades: K-8
Web Site: www.hillsdale.edu/academy/curriculum.htm

National Heritage Academies

Description: The National Heritage Academies (NHA) program is used at the company's 32 charter schools only. It integrates the best aspects of Core Knowledge and the Hillsdale curriculum. The NHA model is based largely on the Core Knowledge Sequence, and emphasizes that "for a democratic society to function, schools must provide a core body of academic, historical and national knowledge to children." Like at Hillsdale, NHA teachers do not use textbooks, but instead use teacher-developed instructional materials and project-based learning. The focus of the NHA curriculum is on heroes and morality in history, with a strong emphasis "on the uniqueness of U.S. history and on the people who shaped it." The NHA curriculum designers also made a concerted effort to integrate geographical studies into their history lessons, a nod to the inseparability of the two disciplines.
Publisher: Various (depends on content of teacher selected programs.)
Grades: K-8
Web Site: http://www.heritageacademies.com/

A Few Good Textbooks

In addition to the commendable history curricula above, and despite the general dearth of good textbooks, there are still a few excellent U.S. history texts available. However, there are no world history textbooks worthy of recommendation, and some of the exceptional U.S. history books are likely to soon be out of print.

Title: *A History of US*
Description: A ten volume U.S. history that is more like literature than a textbook. There are no end-of-chapter tests or quizzes, and the series is written in an engaging, almost conversational way.
Publisher: Oxford
Grades: Fifth through eighth

Title: *A History of the United States*
Description: Authored by former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, this is a traditional political history of the United States written with a better narrative style and centered text than almost any other book available.
Publisher: Prentice Hall
Grades: 11th grade and above

Title: *Pathways to the Present*
Description: This is the best of the "new generation" of textbooks. It has some of the trendy elements of modern textbooks, but still maintains an old-fashioned narrative and features quality writing.
Publisher: Prentice Hall
Grades: 11th grade and above

Conclusion

The unpleasant reality of American education is that there are many, many curricula in wide circulation that simply are not up to the job of providing children with a world-class education. The good news, however, is this: there is hope, and the curricula on this list are your best bets for providing it.

If you have recommendations to share with us, CER will amend this list as we delve into other programs, subjects and knowledge-based tools that demonstrate success for more than just a handful of students.

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Neal McCluskey
Policy Analyst
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