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ALL HELL HAS BROKEN LOOSE IN EDUCATION

And here's what you're
going to do about it



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The Programs and Curriculum are Fatally Flawed

Imagine this: You are a teacher who shows up to professional development at the beginning of the school year and are told that the district has chosen the new English Language Arts/Math/Science/Art/P.E. program after a year-long pilot. (I use the word “pilot” very loosely because typically the curriculum pilots have nothing to do with the results of using those materials, but whether the teachers liked the materials or not. So subjective.)

You have three hours for an open-the-box training which is where a sales rep from one of the big publishing houses (Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, etc.) basically holds up one of 100+ resources in your 20+ boxes and says, “Here it is.” And then your curriculum director gets up and says one of two things, depending on her philosophy on using programs:

“You will follow this with fidelity.” This means that you will teach this as it is written. With a well-written program, fidelity isn’t such a bad idea because it means that teachers have more time to spend thinking about how they will teach the lesson (this is the art of teaching). They can focus on the delivery of the lesson because the lesson has been designed for them.

Or

“You will pick and choose the right activities in this curriculum for your students.” This means that teachers will use the curriculum as a menu of options. This is inherently flawed because there is little continuity between classrooms on which is, in fact, the best resource to use this week and there is little consensus from classroom to classroom on what kids actually need. In the end, most teachers will pick what they like, but that could be far off from what their students need.

So...we have an implementation conundrum.

But even deeper than that, we have flawed materials that, even if a teacher implemented a program with fidelity, most of his or her students wouldn’t reach the grade level benchmark.

Wait...so even a “perfect” implementation of one of the major programs could result in little growth in students?

Yes. Just look at the [NAEP results](#). Scores are LOWER in 2019 than 2017 and only one state improved their scores...albeit marginally. This is failure of epic proportions and we’re just here, doing the same thing over and over again.

Teachers are working their tails off, they are teaching every day. Students are in the classrooms receiving the instruction from the umpteen materials the teachers were given.

And it’s not working.

There are some weak ways to explain why the teaching isn’t working:

- Kids these days are different
- We are competing with technology to get and keep their attention
- Standardized testing is flawed and not showing what students really know
- Parents protect their kids and the teacher’s hands are tied when it comes to discipline

But I don’t buy any of these things. Why? Because teachers are teaching and students are learning.

They're just not learning the right stuff at the right grade level intensity. And they're not learning the right stuff because it's either not in the programs or the programs are so poorly written that teachers and students don't have a chance to learn and have the skills stick.

The programs can be poorly written in that they don't have the correct skills for students to master, but can also be poorly written because the teachers don't stand a chance to actually teach the stuff because it is so complicated!

Take, for example, Engage NY. It is a free curriculum plan for ELA and Math that is popular with school districts. Lots of teachers are using it. The first module has 653 pages for the teachers to study, learn, plan and execute. SIX HUNDRED FIFTY THREE PAGES FOR THE TEACHER TO CONSUME! For one subject area? If a lesson plan is the roadmap to teaching, then this roadmap leads to nowhere...to much overwhelm, too little restraint and too many skills introduced to lead to mastery.

Let's take a look at what it takes to get a student to master something...anything!

1. The teacher teaches a skill directly
2. The teacher models what the skill is going to look like when it's done right
3. The student practices while the teacher looks on and gives correction/feedback
4. Once the student is pretty solid on the skill with the teacher's support, the student starts to use the skill with less supervision and in different scenarios
5. Periodically, the teacher brings the skill back for maintenance practice

We call these steps "explicit instruction." Explicit instruction is how a 2nd grader learns to read big words, a 10th grader learns to analyze a piece of text and a 38-year old learns guitar for the first time.

Underpinning those steps is a scope and sequence. The scope and sequence of any program is basically a roadmap of the skills that will be taught through the five steps above.

However, if the scope and sequence is flawed, it doesn't matter how well the teacher teaches the students the skills, they are at risk of not reaching the grade level benchmark.

AND THIS IS WHY WE ARE DROWNING.

When I look at the scope of sequence of major publisher programs that massive numbers of districts are using, it looks great! All of the grade level skills seem to be in there and they are spread out across the year so that students can work on maintaining their skills. The scope and sequence appears to be on track.

But when I take that scope and sequence and go into the lessons where the rubber truly meets the road in terms of students mastering the skills on the scope and sequence, there is chaos.

- The fundamental skills for the grade level are not taught at all
- The skill on the scope and sequence doesn't match the activity that the teachers will teach
- There is no instruction on the skill (see the five steps above)...just a bunch of practice games or activities
- There is so little practice on a new skill that it is virtually impossible for a student to master that skill
- The unit or theme assessments within the programs are assessing things that are unrelated to the scope and sequence so students could "pass" an assessment and not have been tested on the right skills

I could go on and on...but suffice it to say, these programs that our teachers and students are relying on are an absolute disaster.

It's like going to the doctor and you need penicillin for an infection and the doctor gives you the medicine, you take it faithfully two times with a meal each day and finish the whole prescription. And at the end, the infection isn't any better and the doctor says, "Oooops! I forgot to put the penicillin in the medicine!"

Teachers are teaching like crazy but the materials, even the ones deemed "research based," are flawed.

Here are the programs that I am most concerned about in terms of their scope and sequence, lack of explicit instruction, lesson design and ease of use for teachers:

Tier 1 Core Programs	Tier 2 and 3 Supplemental Intervention Programs
American Reading Company Core Knowledge (CKLA) Engage New York Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Journeys Reading Street Units of Study (Lucy Calkins) Wit and Wisdom Wonders	Foundations Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) Lexia Reading Recovery Rigby SIPPS

One important point to make here is that teachers and students are spending 10+ hours/week minimum teaching and learning these programs. And if you multiply that by the number of weeks in a school year (typically 35-40 weeks), you realize that at the end of one school year a student would have been taught, in this case, English/Language Arts for 350+ hours at a minimum.

If you multiple 350 hours of instruction in English/Language Arts by 13 years of schooling, students will have received at minimum 4,550 hours of instruction on this subject. And our scores are going DOWN?

Hmmm...something's up. Time to investigate.

I have decided to write a series of six articles that detail and expose how all hell has broken loose in education with the goal of identifying where we have gone so wrong and what we're going to do to fix it.

I am certain that the changes that need to be made in education must start from the inside out. If our government, state boards, district and site leaders were going to get it all right and had all of the answers, we wouldn't be at this point. The power to change is right with the most important players in education: the teachers.

Let there be no mistake: Nothing (absolutely nothing) is more important than a well-skilled, enthusiastic teacher who knows his/her content. That alone is how we get real results with students. The rest is just shenanigans.

This is article 3. To get caught up on articles 1 and 2, [click here](#).

Also by Jill Jackson

Get a Backbone, Principal!

Get Some Guts, Coach!

How to Teach Students to Critically Think About Text

How to Teach Students to Write Informational Text

How to Coach Teachers to Teach Almost Anything

The Simplified Lesson Planning Formula