

Of Interest to Teachers

Study Finds Few Teachers Trained for Middle Grades

Although most U.S. middle-grades teachers agree that special preparation is helpful for teaching early adolescents, fewer than one in five actually has received specific middle-grades training, according to a leading research on middle schools.

In addition, there is little evidence to indicate that teacher-education programs are changing to reflect the emerging consensus about what teachers of grades five to nine ought to know and be able to do, Peter C. Scales, the deputy director for the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has concluded.

At a report presented at the National Middle School Association convention in November 1991, Mr. Scales said he found that the vast majority—84 percent—of middle-grades teachers were prepared in elementary- or secondary-education programs.

Teacher recommendations called for earlier, lengthier, and more varied teaching and field experiences to expose them to a greater diversity of students and settings. Only 35 percent of the teachers said they were adequately trained to deal with schools' growing cultural and linguistic diversity.

Teachers also said they needed more preparation in managing the unique social and emotional needs of developing adolescents.

Schools and Computers

More than 91 percent of all U.S. school districts have at least some computers. The current ratio of students to computers is approximately 20 to 1.

Videocassette recorders have become commonplace, available in 94 percent of schools nationwide. Distance-learning projects are underway or being planned in virtually every state. More than 18 percent of American school districts have satellite dishes, and tens of thousands of schools are connected to cable.

However, if the total number of telephones, faxes, televisions, computers, and other forms of communications technology now available in schools were computed nationwide, says Shelly Weinstein, president of

the EDSAT Institute, "for the most part, the school sector would compare to that of a developing nation."

Not all students use computers, notes the 1988 report *Power On: New Tools for Teaching and Learning*. And those who do, spend an average of little more than one hour a week on the machines, or only four percent of their instructional time.—Reported by Lynn Olson in an *Education Week* special report on technology, January 8, 1992.

Who Is a School Board Member?

The average school board member in the U.S. continues to be a white male professional, married, and 41-50 years old, who serves on a seven-member board, according to the most recent annual survey by the *American School Board Journal*.

Women have made slight gains in representation in the past year, while fewer minorities are serving on boards than last year. Men made up 65.3 percent of school boards in 1991, down from 66.3 percent in 1990.

Whites make up 96.5 percent of all board members, up from 93.5 percent in 1990. As in 1990, the largest percentage of minority board members are in the South, where they make up 19.9 percent of the total.

Almost half of board members (45.6 percent) are between 41 and 50 years of age, while a little less than a fifth are between 51 and 60. Another 15.8 percent are between the ages of 36 and 40, and 13.3 percent are over 60.—Reported by the *American School Board Journal*, January 1992.

'Hooked on Phonics' Claims Disputed

The International Reading Association has expressed concern about the promotional claims being made for "Hooked on Phonics," a widely advertised program that claims to help children and adults become "super readers" through the use of workbooks, cassette tapes, and flash cards.

The association's concerns are based on a review of the program conducted last spring by prominent researchers in the field—including Harvard education professor Jeanne

Chall and Jean Osborn, associate director of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Their strongest criticism: The materials concentrate only on sounding out words and not on constructing meaning from them. The researchers also said that the program cannot always be used alone, as its advertising says, because students have no way of knowing if they are correctly decoding the words in the workbooks.

John Shanahan, president of Gateway Products, Inc., the California company that spent \$29 million on radio advertising for the program during the first six months of 1991, disagrees.

"The average first grader has a vocabulary of 24,000 words," he said. "When they use the phonics program they're tapping into that knowledge." He cites letters from grateful purchasers as proof of the program's effectiveness.

Critics say the success of "Hooked on Phonics" (nearly 750,000 units sold) results from the misgivings and guilt it evokes in parents' hearts. *Why isn't my child doing better in school? Will he be stunted for life?* they wonder.

"Here's someone coming in with a magic bullet, saying 'Send me \$180 and you won't have this illness anymore, you won't have this social disease called illiteracy,'" says Ken Komoski of Educational Products Information Exchange, an organization that evaluates educational material. His verdict on "Hooked on Phonics": "You shouldn't advertise something as a reading program and have it be simply rudimentary instruction in the basics of phonics. That doesn't teach anyone to read. It takes them perhaps to the very first step."

Komoski adds that the price is outrageous for the amount of learning that results, and that people would be better served by going to Literacy Volunteers of America or other organizations that teach people how to read.

After complaints about the program were made to the National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau, "Hooked on Phonics" voluntarily changed its ads, though Shanahan claimed that the complaints were nitpicking. Complaints centered on allega-

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tions about the inclusiveness of the claims made by the company, as well as its broad assertion that the product was the only thing an illiterate adult would need to read a 120-page book (the book in question turned out to be a compilation of unrelated words in the program manual).

The kit comes with a 30-day unconditional money-back guarantee, which Shanahan claims is rarely used. His detractors say that people are too embarrassed to admit that they or their children failed to learn to read with a supposedly foolproof system.

In part, educators' complaints about "Hooked on Phonics" and similar programs come from a more general frustration, according to the *Washington Post*. Many products are hyped as essential for students to get good grades in school, but no government agency or even well-established private company rates such products, so the public has no way of knowing how effective they may be.—Reported by *Education Week*, October 23, 1991, and the *Washington Post*, February 3, 1992.

Fitness for Kids

Parents need to help their children maintain regular physical fitness if the growing health crisis among American young people is to be reversed, according to Dr. Kenneth Cooper.

In his latest book, *Kid Fitness: A Complete Shape-Up Program From Birth Through High School*, Cooper notes that at least 30 to 35 percent of American school-age youngsters are at risk for early heart or circulatory disease and premature death as adults. He reports that children are heavier and less aerobically fit now than 15 years ago.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, chairperson of the President's Council of Physical Fitness and Sports and author of the book's foreword, calls on schools to expand and improve their fitness efforts to appeal to all children. He points out that only one state, Illinois, requires daily physical education for all students from kindergarten to grade 12.

Cooper says he blames children's poor health on the absence of physical education in all 12 years of schooling, television, video games, and the prevalence of fast food.

As a prescription for the problems caused by poor fitness, Cooper suggests an action plan, including determining a child's fitness

level, encouraging children to become active, and planning nutritious meals.

Cooper's book is available for \$19.50 from The Fit Stop, Institute for Aerobics Research, 12330 Preston Rd., Dallas, TX 75230.

Few Businesses Offer Training Programs to Make Up for School Shortfalls

While U.S. employers and higher-education officials are extremely critical of the quality of precollegiate education, business has not significantly bolstered its training programs to make up for the shortfalls it finds in education, according to a new survey.

The report, released in September 1991 by a coalition of economic and education groups, also found a wide gap between business leaders' opinions and those of parents and students, who generally hold far more positive views about their schools.

The survey of officials of 402 companies found that only 30 percent gave a positive rating for recent high school graduates' ability to read well, and 22 percent credited students with having learned basic mathematics. Only 12 percent said recent graduates could write well, and just 10 percent believed that they had "learned to solve complex problems."

Higher education officials' evaluation of student achievement was only slightly more positive.

Despite these low ratings, just 14 percent of employers reported having an "organized program of job training of which a major part is teaching basic skills, such as math, reading, and writing."

Sixty-seven percent of employers said they had made no major shifts to respond to the changing workforce, which corporate leaders frequently have said must be higher skilled.

The percentage of students with a positive view of their own achievement averaged at least 40 points higher in each area than that of employers. This gulf has been apparent for years, based on previous studies.

Sixty-six percent of 522 recent graduates surveyed had a positive opinion of their own writing. Sixty-eight percent had a good opinion of their math skills—46 percentage points higher than business respondents'.

And 73 percent of students said they had a "real sense of dedication to work," a commitment seen by only 20 percent of employers.

Parents were only slightly more critical than students. Of the 250 surveyed, 65 percent were positive about their children's education, 56 percent thought their children wrote well, and 67 percent found a "dedication to work."

States Spending Less on Education

For the first time in at least 30 years, states in the U.S. are spending fewer dollars on their colleges and universities this academic year than in the year before, according to an analysis by Illinois State University's Center for Higher Education.

After this academic year began, colleges and universities in 28 states discovered that they would receive a smaller-than-promised sum from the state as legislatures revised budgets and made spending cuts, according to preliminary findings by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

In Massachusetts, higher education funding has been cut 30 percent since 1990. Between 1988 and 1992, tuition, fees, room and board at the University of Massachusetts rose from \$3,800 to \$8,400, according to a student interviewed by the *Washington Post*.

In Florida, the college-age population has climbed at a time when public funding has declined. The state's public universities are rejecting students who have a "B" average or less. Even community colleges are turning away students—3,000 in January alone at Miami-Dade Community College.

At many institutions, classes are being cancelled, professors are being eliminated, class sizes—especially in humanities courses—are growing, libraries are being closed earlier, and tuition costs are growing to double-digit rates.

In Maryland, 1,600 people rallied to protest cuts of tens of millions of dollars in university funding. California students are protesting a 40 percent tuition hike this year, and another 24 percent increase scheduled for next year.

Many students say that they will have to work more to afford the escalating fees, and may require five years to complete their degrees.—Reported by the *Washington Post*, January 29, 1992. ✍