

TRAINED TEACHERS AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS HELP CHILDREN LEARN TO THINK!

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 PART II

Demystifying Education

The modern classic teaching method at P.S. 171 is predicted on research and the belief that it is the responsibility of each generation to pass on its knowledge to the next, thereby sustaining and progressively improving civilization. The overarching concern is academic learning not only for its own pleasure and applicability in the pursuit of happiness, but its educative value in developing in each student a sense of self worth and confidence that comes from knowledge and conscious understanding.

Readings for 1st through 4th grades at P.S. 171 include a range that extends from Aesop's Fables to African folk tales and children's poems, to stories on Mary McLeod Bethune, George Washington Carver, native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Copernicus, Galileo, David and Goliath from the Bible, and an unabridged Robinson Crusoe. Authors include Jane Goodall, who has written on chimpanzees, short stories by Leo Tolstoy and Langston Hughes, Yoshiko Uchida, a Japanese writer, and Makulu and Pura Belpre, both African writers. The syllabus is much expanded from a generation ago, making visible the perspectives of people the children see on the streets.

"We try to identify education," says Ms. Skeen. "From the day that children enroll in P.S. 171, they learn that they must apply their mental abilities to sharpen and broaden their intelligence. Teachers are the facilitators in this process, helping children develop a knowledge of writing, reading and mathematics, necessary foundations for further learning."

At the elementary level, modern classical teaching enables children to learn their ABCs and 1,2,3s while simultaneously applying them to develop rational thinking, simple logic and casual relationships.

"If I take the letters P, O, T, A, T, O and link them together, and knowing each letter and sound, I then know positively, without summing or picture reading, that the word is POTATO." Similarly, "If I know that Albert has five ball point pens and Janice has two ball point pens, then they have all together seven ball point pens and I know that with certainty."

Building Confidence

When these conscious understandings are mastered by children in early grades, they measurably improve the

chances of those children doing well in the basics and in further academic learning. The confidence derived from what they learn in the first three grades enables them to think critically and analytically, to reason, problem-solve, to understand the rationale of personal responsibility for their actions, to have that self-conscious awareness that comes with knowledge, and completion of homework tasks.

Importance of Families

In addition to good student-teacher relationships, the third component of this triumvirate are dedicated and caring families. Ms. Skeen and P.S. 171 teachers ask the support of families primarily through an orientation program for families at the beginning of each year. And they utilize a monthly progress report, which is an 8 1/2 by 14 inch sheet of paper for grades and teacher comments on student performance. The report goes home with students each month. It is then signed by a parent and returned to the school the next day. In New York City's school system, report cards are required to be sent home only three times a year. The monthly report has proven to be a boon in communication.

"The benefit is that if a child is deficient in behavior or certain subjects, the parent gets to see a profile of their child and the highlighted problem area," says Ms. Skeen. "They have a more complete picture on which to base their responses. Such communication involves families in their children's education, reducing chances for families to overreact to less than glowing reports on their children in family/teacher problem conferences at the school." Each session begins with a clear record of the student's performance for that month and previous months.

Selecting Teachers

Maintaining such an excellent teacher environment depends on hard work and dedication to the profession. The principal and teachers engage their students every day. Student attendance is the highest in the district and teacher absenteeism is never a problem. New teachers are recommended by P.S. 171 teachers. The principal

and administrators make the final selection. Support is given during the new teacher's transition period, which can stretch for up to two years. During that time, the principal and more experienced teachers give advice on such topics as classroom management, curriculum, lesson planning, techniques for encouraging students to focus and concentrate, and the importance of study and homework.

Says Ms. Skeen: "In spite of what many people in society say about the overwhelming problems of inner city and rural poor children, African-American and Hispanic students can succeed and compete. If we as adults provide a strong foundation in elementary school, we would not be dealing with remediation at higher levels of education; we would be dealing with enrichment!"

It would seem that when the teaching team at P.S. 171 does so well, it should be awarded. That's not the case, however, under existing government financing. There are no dollars for excellent schools. Only unsuccessful schools with the lowest reading and math scores receive supplemental money from Chapter 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Often those money's achieve no appreciable results after years of investment.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION:

The Phelps-Stokes Fund believes that Chapter 1, the federal government's largest investment in elementary and secondary education in its current form is inadequate to meet the challenges of the 1990's and beyond. The 1993 Chapter 1 reauthorization must go farther to reward excellent schools like P.S. 171.

The most critical deficiencies in Chapter 1 guidelines are:

- * A perverse incentive structure that discourages schools from working hard to improve student performance;

- * A continued focus on skills-oriented remediation that denies the richness of learning to those who need more, not less of what makes education engaging and exciting;

- * Resources spread too thinly

to make a difference in the neediest schools;

- * Methods for evaluating progress that are antiquated (and downright harmful).

Unless those of us involved in education see getting children to high levels of achievement as our responsibility — and unless we are equipped with the skills

to do so, our children will simply never make it. No matter how wonderful the staff in special programs they cannot compensate in 25 minutes per day for the efforts of watered-down instruction the rest of the school day. There is ample evidence to show that under optimum teaching and learning conditions —

those with high expectations and skilled instruction — children will learn at high levels.

Chapter 1 money will be more wisely spent on building schools like P.S. 171. We know how to teach students successfully; there can be no excuses any more for continued failure to do so.



LOS ANGELES — As students look on, Maxie Juzang, President of Specialized Systems, Inc. (right) presents a check in the amount of \$5,000.00 to Mathew Greene (left), Coordinator of the One To One Young Entrepreneurs' Program, an after-school entrepreneur training program for at risk students in South Central L.A. The program - a partnership between One on One, National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) and Cities In Schools — was developed to assist young people in the development of their own businesses. Specialized Systems, Inc. is a diversified turn-key automated computer firm which specializes in hardware, software installation, training and custom programming services.

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