Calling the Education System ‘Progressive’ is a Lie. Here’s Why.

A correspondent friend of mine from France recently lamented the changes in her country’s educational system and the falling test scores of French students. She then casually added, “I wish we would go back to the way we were taught in the 50s and 60s.”

Her comment hit me like a bombshell.

I was in seventh grade in 1962 when my teacher introduced us to the “New Math,” a program designed in part as a response to Soviet Union space adventures and alleged superiority in the sciences. That shift in the way my teacher taught math left me first confused, and then with a dislike of the subject altogether. Although I continued studying math well into college, I look on my middle school years as the time when my romance with numbers died.

Since then, our government and its brigades of bureaucrats have hit the classrooms with half a dozen approaches to education. The open classroom concept, outcome-based education, No Child Left Behind, Common Core, constructivist mathematics, whole language: these and other fads have come and gone as antidotes to the falling test scores and academic weaknesses of American students.

None of these “new” approaches have worked.
After taking the 2015 international PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) math evaluation, American students ranked 31st among the 38-member countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Student scores on the same test in reading and science remained flat,

meaning they were about average on the international score-sheet.

The PISA exam doesn't cover composition, but a simple Google search for "American students writing abilities" turns up a tidal wave of articles decrying the young for their ineptitude with words and sentences.

So what are we to do? How do we correct a failing educational system?

What if we took my friend's offhand suggestion and returned to the academic policies of the 1950s?

My mother preserved in a scrapbook every one of my report cards from first grade through high school. As I look at those reports, I find that for grades one through eight we were taught the same core subjects: English Grammar and Composition, Reading, History, Science, and Math. The early years also brought courses in Handwriting and Citizenship, or behavior in class. We memorized poetry, arithmetic facts, and historical names and dates. We learned the parts of a sentence and the parts of a cell. We were taught the essay, though even then received too little practice in the art of writing. If some teacher introduced "political correctness" into the classroom, I was unaware of it until I entered college.

Mostly, we studied the basics. The basics for any student on the planet are reading, composition, and mathematics. Learn these three subjects well, and a student can master any subject from physics to literary criticism.

In those days, the federal government had little to do with education. State governments administered the machinery of schooling—school buses, buildings, and so on—but otherwise the teachers taught as they saw fit. Students were not subject to statewide or federal examinations. The classroom disruptions common today, the enormous number of students taking various pharmaceuticals for learning and attention disorders, the

intrusion of government into the classroom: these did not exist in the schools my contemporaries and I attended.

For two decades, Finnish students have ranked high in the PISA tests. Many factors account for this success, but here, I suspect, is the main one as reported by *Smithsonian Magazine*: "Finland has vastly improved in reading, math and science literacy over the past decade in large part because its teachers are trusted to do whatever it takes to turn young lives around."

Teaching children is not rocket science. You need a room, good books, a few supplies (not electronic devices), some tables and chairs, and a teacher devoted to the students and to the work of marking homework, tests, and essays.

For twenty years I administered just such a classroom. I taught Latin, literature, history, and composition to several hundred homeschooling students ranging from sixth to twelfth grades. For each seminar—some students took more than one—the students attended class for two hours a week. I then assigned three to six hours of homework, depending on the level of the class. Many of the students remained enrolled in these seminars for three, four, and five years, progressing from the basic reading and writing course in the seventh grade to Advanced Placement studies in various histories, Latin, and literature. Because we worked hard together, most of these young people graduated high school more than ready for college or the work place.

C.S. Lewis famously said:

> *"Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."*

Maybe it’s time we declared ourselves progressives and turned back.

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[Image Credit: Max Pixel]