

Getting Ready for School

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By Dr. Martha M. Wood

Have you noticed articles during the past few weeks offering advice to parents on how to be sure their children are "ready for school"? One writer cautions about the importance of getting enough sleep and having a proper breakfast. Another gives hints on back to school shopping. In fact, in the United States, back to school shopping season is second only to Christmas in sales volume. Stores give checklists for the supplies needed for each grade level at specific schools. Back to school fashions are on display in stores and on television. Bus routes and open house dates are published.

However, these are the superficial criteria we use to judge readiness for school: Does my child have the appropriate clothes? Have we purchased all the supplies on the school list? Does my child know the bus schedule and the classroom to report to? In light of the latest reports on Georgia Test Scores, maybe parents are asking the wrong question. What they should be asking is: "Is my child ready to LEARN?" Very few parents ask that question, but it is the most critical one. There is a checklist for "Learning Readiness", which unfortunately is not posted in stores, or discussed in the news coverage, or distributed to parents in fliers.

The checklist for Learning Readiness has only four items. Some claim that students who do not meet these criteria for learning readiness are really NOT ready for school, and these students cannot gain the maximum benefit from classroom instruction even though it may be of the highest quality.

In years past, it was safe to assume that most children entering school in the United States were "ready to learn." Those readiness skills that are prerequisites to learning already had been mediated to the child by parents or other caring adults. The children knew both cognitively and affectively how to "do school." **WE CAN NO LONGER MAKE THAT ASSUMPTION.** Many children enter the classroom every year without the cognitive and affective skills that are prerequisites for optimal learning. These children can be found not only in urban and rural areas, but also in our suburban schools.

In order to be "Ready to Learn," students should have the following: (1) A Disposition for Learning; (2) Adequate Cognitive Skills for the learning task; (3) Adequate Knowledge Base for the learning task; and (4) Adequate Study Skills for the learning task. If students are having difficulty academically, there is usually a deficiency in one or more of these Learning Readiness Criteria.

Cognitive Enrichment Programs are designed to correct these deficiencies, which often are considered irreversible by parents and educators who feel the appropriate course is to accept the student's limitations and "do the best we can." Sometimes this translates into

assigning these students to a limiting environment and/or to limited expectations, (i.e. special education curricula).

Research in Learning and Cognition supports the premise that students who are performing poorly can learn how to learn. However, no quick fix is promised. Most critical of the four criteria is unfortunately the one that receives the least focused attention – the need for the cognitive skills that are required to learn material being presented. If intelligence is viewed as stable and immutable, cognitive deficiencies must in turn be viewed as permanent. However, that is not the case, and therein lays the best news of the day, for an otherwise bleak outlook for public education in Georgia.

Current studies in psychology and education show that with proper instruction, cognitive skills can be learned at any age, and all learners can improve their thinking skills. For students with cognitive deficiencies, continued repetition and tutoring in content areas will be of only limited value unless the cognitive deficiencies are also addressed. Cognitive Enrichment Programs offer one example of how we, as parents, educators, and policy makers, etc., can provide a vehicle that has been shown to strengthen thinking and learning skills.

Ideally, focused instruction in thinking (cognitive enrichment) should be a part of the school curriculum. However, "thinking" is not recognized as a content area. Rather it is viewed as something that should be a part of all instruction. As a result, focused instruction in cognitive enrichment does not fit the current instructional models used in Georgia. Still, even as an alternative, Cognitive Enrichment could be offered as part of an After School Program. We can make significant progress without completely reinventing the bureaucratic wheel, and with minimal investment or interruption of the current model.

Perhaps the reason parents and educators haven't asked the question "Is my child ready to LEARN?" is because we don't know how to answer that question. And even more pertinent, if the answer should be "no", we don't know how to remedy the situation. But fear not. Programs to assess cognitive functioning and programs to provide intervention to improve thinking and learning skills are available and should be made a part of the curriculum if we are ever to answer "yes" to the question: "Is my child ready to LEARN?" Then watch those scores climb!

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