

Improving Educational Achievement For Our Children



How A New Look at the Problem Leads to a Successful and Economical Solution

The Legacy Foundation

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The Traditional View of the Problem

Introduction

In a recent speech, President Obama reflected an ongoing effort to find better ways to improve educational opportunities. The desire and effort to improve education is not new. In 1983 a federally appointed commission offered a report titled, “A Nation at Risk.” The authors — one of which was Dr. David P. Gardner, past president of the University of Utah — suggested that our public educational system was failing to keep pace with the needs of our time and more attention and resources were required. Since then we have spent considerable time and money attempting to improve academic achievement. *We have not achieved that objective.*

In a later address, Dr. Gardner stated, “Much that passes for education is not education; it is ritual.” This statement summarizes and highlights his concern as well as the feelings of many people who have come to believe that the methods we use to educate should receive scrutiny and be changed and improved. The focus has been on improving academic achievement. Over the years, the most sought-after changes have included better tests, increased salaries for teachers, more funds per pupil, better facilities, reduced class size, and improved curriculum materials. To date, these changes, except in a very few cases, have not resulted in improved achievement. For instance, according to the Cato Institute, since 1970 the U.S. has increased per pupil expenditures, adjusted for inflation, from \$5,393 to \$11,470 in 2004, and during that time we have seen very little improvement in math scores and none in reading scores (“Education System Needs More Freedom, Not More Money,” Star Parker, Deseret News, March 2, 2009).

Greater Urgency Because We Live in Exponential Times

Every state has its academic successes. Some schools produce achievement reflected in national tests scores that are higher than the national average. In many cases we see that overall education would be improved if we gave more prestige to our schools and showed and felt greater respect for our teachers. However, sometimes when test results are higher than the national average it reflects how poorly the rest of the country is doing. There are few states in our country that claim all their schools are doing what we hope they will do when it comes to the academic performance of our children.

There is greater urgency to solve the problems of achievement because we are seeing rapid social, technological, economical, scientific, and educational changes. We must prepare our children for jobs that will become available, to solve problems that don't now exist, and to be more adaptable to face new social conditions. It is clear that achievement from more people is the one condition that makes this seem possible. The urgency to improve achievement hearkens to us from a future mirror which shows that current inadequacies will have future and far reaching consequences if we don't improve. One is the limitation we are placing on our economic potential if we do not produce more achievers. There will be fewer people who can fuel desired economic growth, participate financially and socially in the world as it will be then, and provide leadership for those challenges which surely will come.

A New Definition of the Problem

When a problem has been identified and several attempted solutions have failed, it is time to consider that the problem has been incorrectly or too narrowly defined — a practice which leads to solutions that won't work. Typically, for example, achievement has been thought of as a learning behavior in school motivated by competition, extrinsic rewards, individualizing practices, and other situational incentives. In this case, student achievement can be observed when students participate in class, listen to the teacher, do homework, and study productively, all in the process of acquiring knowledge. Acquiring knowledge in the school culture is the specific desired outcome of achievement in this specific setting. We currently measure this form of achievement by test scores and educational progress shown in graduation rates and enrollment in higher education. All of these are believed to reflect achievement or the amount of knowledge students acquire.

But suppose that achievement is an academic issue and something else. Suppose that instead of defining achievement as an academic behavior to be seen in the classroom only, achievement is also a personality trait, an enduring character quality, something that is caught instead of taught, and something that must be developed and internalized in the context of human relationships. This kind of achievement is displayed as a love for learning and knowledge. It is shown when an individual has a future-oriented perspective and is self motivated to acquire knowledge, develops his or her own strategies and methods of learning, finds satisfaction in the process of achieving, and attaches his/her self concept to the ability to learn and know. If achievement in the process of acquiring knowledge is a character quality, then achievement is something more than test and grade performance. Further, traditional strategies to improve achievement are temporary at best.

This makes achievement qualitatively different than how it is typically defined. Seen in this light, our attempts to improve achievement by adding funds to schools, improving curriculum materials, using temporary rewards, etc. fail because, as solutions, they do not impact children as a form of socialization and character development..

If the problem with achievement is only within the school culture, then we would likely see effects of low achievement only in academic settings. If achievement is a character quality developed over time and within important relationships, we would be able to observe the lack of it in many different settings. Its absence could be seen in people having difficulty entering into and succeeding in marriage. Its absence could be seen in the number of parents who default on parental responsibilities. Its absence could be seen in reduced numbers of students prepared for higher education and increased numbers of individuals who are ill-equipped to perform at work and unprepared for job changes in a changing world. The lack of it in youth would show up in juvenile crime, drug abuse, gangs, and other youth difficulties. Reviewing these youth problems reveals that almost all are somehow connected to the lack of achievement and almost all, when they are solved, are solved in part by improvements in attitudes and behavior connected to achievement.

If we add all the foregoing together, there are two fairly clear implications. The fact that the lack of achievement can be observed in many different situations outside of school suggests that achievement is more than an academic behavior and may be a personality or character trait, which requires a process of development similar to how character traits are developed. If so, the process of teaching it will require a different form of development than the individualized approach using incentives for teachers and students, competition, and reward programs currently

available in schools. We can further conclude that unless we find ways to promote achievement as an enduring part of the human personality, we will inevitably see several negative trends perpetuated.

Reexamining the Relationship Between Teachers and Parents

Viewing achievement as an enduring character quality, rather than a form of performance in schools, suggests that another set of solutions might be available to us. Rather than looking only for “inside the school” solutions, we can, for example, give new consideration to the important relationship between home and school. This is because children spend the majority of their time in these two environments, and this is where most personality development takes place.

Parent involvement has been long and widely recognized as an important influence on student achievement. As suggested by the **Harvard Educational Review** (2007), “Parental involvement improves achievement in every age and every developmental stage.” Parents have a stake in the educational progress of their children and they have much to lose if their children are not well educated. Many scientific journals, books, and government reports tell of efforts to find the most effective form of parental involvement which improves student achievement, but there is still little agreement. Schools currently invite parents to be involved in many ways, including back-to-school nights at the beginning of each school year and twice-yearly parent and teacher conferences. A school may also invite parents to read to their children and actively teach science or other hard-to-learn concepts. A school may request that parents volunteer to help inside classrooms and participate in a variety of other school projects. Most public schools cannot create enough parental support. In many cases, the parents whose children have the greatest difficulty in school are the least likely to communicate and participate with the teachers.

A gradual separating of school and home leads to less-effective parental involvement, inadequate development of achievement, and reduced parent-teacher cooperation. During the last four decades, we have seen increased separation and fragmentation among people, which is displayed in the loss of a sense of community between home and school. We have also seen inroads into family relationship time by many powerful social forces. In many cases, this has led to reductions in overall parental involvement with their children. For instance, in home and family life, many children have been exposed to extraordinary amounts of technology, including the internet, iPods, TV, computer games, and other attractive devices. (See **ibrain** by Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan, Collins Living, 2008.) As this one example illustrates, children may lack achievement because the culture they now live in does not require it. These conditions appear to bring children to school less motivated and less prepared to achieve.

Simultaneously there have been new and experimental curriculums introduced that many parents do not understand, can’t help their children with, and that may or may not add to teacher effectiveness. There have been additions to teacher duties, changes in teacher job roles, new policies, comparatively low salaries that motivate good teachers to leave education — and all of this adds up to teachers giving more focus to their own students and assuming that whatever is done they must do by themselves. This, as proposed here, results in home and school becoming increasingly divergent. In this condition, more children come to school less prepared to learn and achieve, and because of school-related factors, such as large class sizes, individuals may find less emphasis on achievement when they get there. Adding to this divergence, when parents and teachers are preoccupied with financial pressures or family problems and when they do not feel

appreciated, the result is a real or perceived lack of good communication, which perpetuates the psychological distance between school and home.

Practical evidence suggests that the right type of parental involvement can produce improved parent-teacher cooperation and promote the personality qualities of achievement. In contrast to the forgoing, there is practical evidence that a certain type of parental involvement promotes the development of students as achievers. Many high-achieving students are no more intelligent or able when compared with many who are not motivated to achieve. Studies of students who achieve at the highest levels generally indicate that they often, perhaps typically, come from homes where the home environment motivates achievement and matches the environment of their classes. When this fortunate combination of parental involvement and teacher effectiveness exists, these students appear to do very well in the same schools with the same teachers, where other students do not. When children with sufficient intelligence and other mental abilities do not succeed, there is a strong possibility that their home environment somehow does not match or reinforce the achievement environment of the school.

“In the homes of high achieving children, the academic climate of the home meshes with the academic climates found in their schools. Together they generate a series of beliefs, attitudes, skills, and motivations that lead to higher achievement of many kinds.” (*The Educational Research and Testing Service*, December 2007.)

A Solution That Fits the Problem

If achievement is a character quality, it will be learned through a socialization process similar to the development of other character traits like integrity, accountability, responsibility, and dependability. These are developed through high-quality relationships with people who set examples, involve children in several relevant experiences that require demonstrations of the particular quality, and give feedback and teach on a repeated basis. In the context of education, as it currently takes place, the highest achievers most often come from homes where the environment there matches the environment of the classroom. It seems logical to conclude that overall student achievement, as a character quality, can be improved by creating this positive condition for more students. This premise has been tested by The Legacy Foundation over a ten-year period with more than two thousand teachers, many willing parents, over one hundred fifty schools, and with the cooperation of numerous school administrators.

The First Step: Facing and Solving a Practical Problem. As we began and before we proceeded very far, we recognized a practical problem. Adding any new program or conducting research in educational settings is made difficult by personnel changes, data gathering, the sampling challenge in creating well-defined, experimental-control conditions, and the complexity of the educational process. In addition to these challenges, however, there is an obvious problem to be addressed. No matter how good any program might be, its usefulness is minimized if it requires too much time or effort and if people do not use it. Therefore, we sought to develop an applied intervention suitable for the natural environment of school and home to ensure that whatever we did was inherently easy and attractive enough to be implemented by any school and family.

Three questions guided this process:

1. Could an attempt to improve achievement, which is in addition to regular school work, be easily implemented without disturbing the proper emphasis teachers want to and should give to the curriculum?
2. Since parents and teachers often feel overloaded, would they be willing to spend even a small amount of time in order to form a working partnership?
3. Would this approach produce measurable results in improved student achievement?

The Second Step: Identifying and Creating Conditions That Lead to the Development of Achievement. Not every teacher successfully promotes the development of achievement. Most think that if they emphasize learning, they are also promoting achievement. This is not the case because achievement and learning, though related to each other, are different mental and social abilities. Therefore we addressed the question of how teachers would organize their classes if we defined achievement as a character or personality quality rather than a mental ability to be used for learning only in school. Then we identified and developed processes that are or could be created by the teacher that (1) promote or develop achievement traits and (2) could be matched by parents at home. This was a sizeable task because there is no universal agreement about what teachers do in the process of teaching that develops a character trait. We obviously were not looking for low performance conditions found in some schools which parents could match. The best way to proceed, we believed, was to develop something supported by research, teach it to teachers, and see if it succeeded.

Therefore, we decided to use a body of research indicating that social, emotional, and cognitive development are influenced by the requirements of the environment children participate in (e.g. see **Cognitive Development** by Rosemary Rosser, Allan and Bacon, 1994). This same research focused on developing brains, indicating that the nature of brain growth is influenced by the cultural and learning requirements placed on it (e.g. see **The Individual in A Social World**, Stanley Milgram, McGraw-Hill, 1992; **The New Brain: How the Modern Age is Rewiring Your Brain**, T. Robert Restak, US: Rodale Press, 2003, **ibrain**, by Gary Small et.al, 2008). Developing children are strongly motivated to adapt successfully to the language, mental, social, and emotional requirements found in their respective environments such as home and school. Further, when two or more contexts (e.g. home and school) are similar in some respects, children more readily transfer lessons learned in one to the other, accept the reality of the requirements of both, and accelerate their motivation to perform better in them. This is especially the case when character or personality behavior such as achievement is involved.

We spent four years identifying and trying out a set of conditions that teachers could create that inspired greater student achievement. Our criteria were that student achievement must improve and parents must be able to reinforce or closely match what teachers did in their classes. We proposed to teachers that they organize their classes to promote the development of character qualities closely related to achievement and then shape peer influence accordingly. Parents could create a climate of high-quality social and emotional conditions in their families that is similar to what effective teachers create. Parents could not duplicate the teacher's skill in teaching the curriculum. What both teachers and parents could do is teach learning strategies like memory, character concepts like responsibility, and achievement skills such as goal setting. Because this first effort focused on what teachers alone could do to develop children, we called it *Character and Competence*.

During this time, we communicated with many teachers and observed many schools. As suggested above, our objective was to learn how the classroom as part of the school's social environment (e.g. structure, leadership, and peer relationships) influences achievement. The results we observed led to the specific focus on leadership where teachers structured their class for achievement in a goal setting process and taught learning strategies, achievement skills, and character qualities while they create a more positive and influential form of peer influence. When teachers carried out these methods, we observed many students beginning to manifest a personality quality known as "achievement motivation."

This motivation is evidence of the development of achievement as a character quality. It is displayed by a fairly strong desire, an internalized and largely unsupervised motivation to accomplish and achieve. It was first introduced by David McClelland at Harvard University in a series of articles written during the 1950s. His findings suggest that strong motivational properties can be taught if supported and reinforced by adults working together to benefit children. When this happens, individuals find pleasure both in the process of achieving and the results of their efforts. Most importantly, there is considerable research evidence that achievement motivation is not a temporary condition but exists as a lasting personality quality that is clearly and positively linked to academic achievement.

The Third Step: Bringing Parents and Teachers Together in a Partnership Called Achievement Synchrony. The next logical step was to add parental involvement in a way that was effective and motivated parents to participate. In the last few years, volunteer demonstration schools were added who committed to involve parents and teachers in creating mutually reinforcing home and school environments. This effort was given its own name of *Achievement Synchrony* because teachers brought several conditions together in their schools and parents and teachers were brought into a combined effort on behalf of the students.

How Achievement Synchrony Works

Achievement Synchrony brings parents into direct and ongoing communication with the teacher — in contradistinction to relating to the school administration — where both are working to improve the achievement experience for their children/students. It involves class and family leadership. Both teachers and parents create a structure for school and home achievement by forming a benchmark and selecting goals to create "a high achieving class," and a "great family." They each have access to a set of teaching activities so both can teach about learning strategies, achievement skills, and character traits. For example, both teach about goal setting, organizing time, honesty, managing emotions and other pro-social abilities. These activities are taught on a self-selected basis whenever parents and teachers deem them applicable to negative student/child behavior they want to improve. Teachers organize their classes to shape peer influence toward achievement and parents work to increase the sense of unity in their families. Achieving the objective of working together obviously requires good communication, and the website **www.teachr.org** was created for parents and teachers to use. Parents and teachers spend approximately 30 minutes each week conducting class and family meetings to evaluate their progress, ask children to be accountable, and teach success-oriented, age-appropriate activities. Each can communicate with the other about the activities they are teaching at school and at home. The following table shows the results of the parent and teacher partnership.

School	Percent Improvement		
Heritage Academy—Phoenix, AZ	Reading: 11.5%	Math: 18%	Language: 15%
Perry Elementary—Brigham City, UT	Language: 2%	Math: 11%	Science: 1%
West Elementary—St. George, UT (second year results)	Language: 5%	Math: 6.5%	Science: 0%
Green Acres Elementary—Ogden, UT	Reading: 3%	Math: 11%	Language: 12%
Flandreau Middle School—Flandreau, South Dakota	Reading: 3.7%	Math: 2%	Language: 9%
Alamaden Country School—San Jose, California	Reading: 3.7%	Math: 4%	Language: 4%
Upland Terrace—Salt Lake City, UT	Language: 1.5%	Math: 3%	Science: 2.5%

The Results: Surprising and Positive

We found that schools in different demographic areas produced positive results. (1) We saw that an ongoing parent and teacher partnership can be installed in a school without unduly affecting the time teachers spend with the curriculum. Based on teacher reports, they have more time to teach because there are fewer conduct problems. (2) Parents and teachers can work together to create matching achievement environments at home and at school and the result appears to be unusually high achievement. (3) The data, shown from scores on standardized national achievement tests, indicate that effective teaching processes in the school, when matched with parental involvement at home, appear to improve student achievement.

When parents and teachers worked together to create mutually reinforcing achievement environments, many teachers reported greater motivation for them to invest in the teaching process and feeling more excited about teaching. They spent less time dealing with distracting conduct problems, assignments, and homework difficulties, which appear frequently when students are not highly motivated. Many parents reported that their families are more unified, children perform better with household chores and work, and there is less family conflict.

To ensure that the test scores are interpreted appropriately, we emphasize that they are not the result of controlled experimental research. The purpose of this project was to assess whether this approach could be implemented within the demands and complexities existing for teachers and families whose children attend public or private schools. School principals reported their national achievement test scores, the scores for one year were compared with scores obtained from the previous year, and then they were tabulated into percentages of improvement shown here.

Additional, Economical, and Unexpected Findings

The cost of this program is remarkably small for schools, for individual families, and much less than has been spent in other efforts to improve achievement. Because the demonstration schools had a variety of class sizes and cultural diversity, we were able to see other findings that suggest positive potential. (1) This method helps integrate culturally divergent students into school. The demonstration schools were able to show improved student achievement where enrollment included high numbers of transient and culturally unique students. (2) Bringing parents and teachers together in a way that helps students be accountable appears to inexpensively compensate for large classes. Teachers with larger class sizes were helped by students turning in their homework more regularly, more student accountability, students helping each other, peer pressure toward achievement instead of away from it, and fewer conduct problems. (3) Many teachers recognized the benefits of this approach as demonstrated by their willingness to participate voluntarily in training programs, some of which were held on professional development days and others which were conducted after school and on weekends.

Conclusion

These results permit us to cautiously, but we think fairly, conclude that improving achievement is effective — and very inexpensive — when we view achievement as a character quality and promote its development at home and at school.