

Editorial

American education needs a 'paradigm shift'

The new report from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), showing that American high school seniors rank near the bottom in a 21-nation study of children's competence in math and science, has once again put a focus on the crisis in American education. Every year or so, some similar study rings the alarm bell; proposals for reform are drafted, debated, and implemented; and, by the time the next study's results are announced, the situation has gotten worse.

The roots of the crisis are to be found in the early 20th century, with the widespread adoption in the United States of the Romantic, Progressivist ideology, according to which it is harmful to impose academic rigor on children, since this will stifle their "natural creativity."

With the cultural "paradigm shift" of the 1960s, the problem became much worse. Following our disastrous embrace of the "New Math," we tolerated the introduction into our schools of the intellectual depravity of the New Age: environmentalism, cultural relativism, existentialism, deconstructionism. We abandoned *truth* as the standard. Instead of Shakespeare, young people read Hermann Hesse, H.G. Wells, and Allen Ginsberg. The counterculture took over the Baby-Boomer generation, and those that came after them.

Naturally, academic achievement declined. The "experts"—the same people who had brought us the "New Math" and related programs in the first place—began to agitate for reform. We unbolted the children's desks from the floor, had everybody sit in a circle, made the teacher a "mentor" or "facilitator"—no authoritarianism here!—and, when the children persisted in banging their heads against the wall, we brought in guidance counsellors to advise them on how to improve their self-esteem. Their academic performance, and their self-esteem, both got worse.

Today, there are hopeful signs that a "reverse paradigm shift" is beginning to take effect, as Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. writes, in an article to be published in the Spring 1998 issue of *Fidelio* magazine, titled "How to Think in a Time of Crisis." This reawakening began during the end of 1997, as many thinking citizens and

policymakers began to recognize, to their shock, that the so-called "Asia crisis" was in fact a global, systemic one. This realization has been associated with an explosive growth in the worldwide influence of LaRouche's ideas.

In his article, LaRouche calls for education based on Classical-humanist principles of pedagogy. In a good secondary education, he writes, each student must relive the great discoveries of human history: "In place of the mind-destructive methods of either 'programmed education,' or its approximations, the policy must be, that the student must adopt the life-long, endless goal of reliving, as frequently as possible, the mental experience of reenacting, in some meaningful sense of succession, the original cognitive acts of discovery and validation of virtually, implicitly, every valid principle known to man today.

"It is the education of the student's cognitive process, as contrasted with, and opposed to textbook-oriented, or related forms of mind-deadening learning, which is the proper mission of education. The object is, that if the student were to learn virtually nothing, but to develop the cognitive habits required to regenerate almost all principles of knowledge, education has succeeded; whereas, if the student has successfully learned everything, as an idiot-savant in a 'wired society' might do, but has discovered no validated principle, that student's miseducation is the germ of a national catastrophe."

Approaching the reform of education from this standpoint, we can begin to sort out such matters as the debate over national standards and a core curriculum, and the need for improving the training of science and math teachers. Yes, it is important for primary and secondary school students to have a coherent curriculum, building in one year upon what was learned before; and yes, teachers should be trained in the subjects which they teach (rather than in "educational psychology," for example). But the most fundamental issues to stress, in developing the content of the curriculum, are *cognition* and *truthfulness*. Reintroducing those into American education, is the paradigm shift we urgently require.