

Feature

The Shame of the Schools

By [Roger Shattuck](#)

The great truths in education turn out to be half-truths in search of their other half.

1.

On Town Meeting Day in March 2000, some four hundred legal residents of Lincoln, Vermont, elected me to a three-year term on the board of Mt. Abraham Union High School, located in neighboring Bristol. A few days later, I took my oath of office and settled into a schedule of biweekly meetings in the school library. Comprising grades 7 through 12, the school serves around nine hundred students from five rural towns for an annual budget topping \$9 million under a board of thirteen elected members. Mt. Abe belongs to the Addison (County) Northeast Supervisory Union district. In March 2003, I was reelected to the Mt. Abe board and also elected to the district board coordinating six local schools.

During the first year I felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of important and sometimes ominous decisions that engulfed the board. We dealt with school security, contract negotiations with teachers, selecting a new principal, Internet filtering, special education mandates, and preparing the all-devouring, seemingly self-propelled annual document called the budget to submit to voters. I thought I'd never catch on, never learn the names of all the key people plus the acronyms used to designate occult entities in the wonderland of education.

After forty years of college teaching, I had no particular agenda to promote on the board. Principally I was curious to find out what actually is being taught in this rural high school, which has the largest payroll within twenty miles. I soon learned that the board spends little time discussing curriculum. I was told that the best way to inform myself would be to visit a few core courses. I chose English and History, or rather "Language Arts" and "Social Studies." (A return to the earlier names became the first item on my agenda.) Given a schedule by the department head, I visited about a dozen classes and was welcomed without fanfare or raised eyebrows. These visits gave me a vivid impression of overcrowding, of teachers without their own classrooms and pushing overloaded carts like the homeless, of poorly and noisily ventilated inside classrooms, and of the constant demands imposed upon teachers for patience, firmness, and imagination. But amid multiple activities in the classrooms I found it impossible to discern a coherent sequence of content guiding the classes, not even in different sections of the same course. It would require months of class visits to gain an adequate sense of what is being taught in my school.

It turned out that there was another road to take. I had volunteered to be the school board representative on the teachers' curriculum committee preparing part of the self-study for

our big ten-year NEASC accreditation visit. (NEASC stands for New England Association of Schools and Colleges.) This committee of eight teachers, chaired by the science department head, alerted me to four sets of documents dealing directly or indirectly with the curriculum. I made it my business to obtain and study all these documents—as follows:

1. *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*, Vermont State Board of Education, 84 pages, 1996. (See [excerpt 1 here](#).)
2. *Curriculum Guidelines*, Addison Northeast Supervisory Union. Six K– 12 documents prepared and revised in rotation by the district, in Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, Fine Arts, Social Studies, and Foreign Languages. They range in length from 33 pages (Mathematics) to over 200 pages (Language Arts), for a total of nearly 600 pages.
3. *Course Selection Guide*, Mt. Abraham Union High School. Published yearly. Contains 60 pages of brief descriptions (3 to 15 lines) of all courses offered by the school.
4. Course syllabi filed by all teachers as required by law in the assistant principal's office. One to 3 pages following a recommended outline.

The first three of these documents form a stack over four inches high. The teachers on the accreditation curriculum committee brought none of the above documents with them to refer to. They kept borrowing my copy of the *Course Selection Guide*. All the teachers appeared to acknowledge that document number 1, *Vermont's Framework of Standards*, contains the tables of the law. But they had not read it carefully. None of the teachers seemed familiar with or interested in document number 2, the district's own lengthy *Curriculum Guidelines*, prepared by committees of teachers meeting over a period of many months. The *Course Selection Guide* is little more than a useful list identifying all course offerings. The syllabi record what has been taught in a particular course or section, not a program of study approved by the school.

It is not easy to describe the first two official documents. The state *Framework of Standards* and the lengthy district *Curriculum Guidelines* (themselves based scrupulously on the state *Framework*) presumably lay out a course of study for all students. As they stand, these two documents do not and cannot serve this function. They mention no authors' names and no titles of books to be read. Only the science and mathematics documents specify topics for a particular grade. Elsewhere entry after entry stipulates that students shall *examine, investigate, analyze, understand, and interpret* immense intellectual topics such as "fiction" and "nature and nurture." The verbs *teach, learn, and study* do not appear. Because they clump four grades together, these documents cannot, for example, provide an answer to the question: "In what grade are the following materials taught: the solar system, Athenian democracy, dangling modifiers, the Founding Fathers." Such items do not even appear.

The nearly impenetrable pages of the state of Vermont's *Framework of Standards* plus the Addison Northeast *Curriculum Guidelines* add up to an elaborate professional

camouflage of the fact that at no level—state, district, or school—is there a coherent, sequenced, and specific curriculum. The teachers on the curriculum committee for accreditation had good reason to ignore the district *Curriculum Guidelines*. They propose no course of study, no coordinated sequence of subjects within the core fields. I'm not saying that our district curriculum is watered down or lopsided or old-fashioned or newfangled. I'm saying that those six hundred pages contain no useful curriculum at all.

What then fills these pages in multiple copies which no one reads or consults? In large part they contain bland hortatory statements about what students "should know and be able to do." It's almost a mantra. Yet the two major curriculum documents refer to no specific content, to no simple lists of items such as osmosis and Martin Luther King Jr. and, one hopes, Martin Luther.

And what also fills these pages, in the place of what to teach, is lengthy instructions about how to teach these unspecified materials. Our district *Curriculum Guidelines* of recent years devote increasing space to "Best Practice in Teaching," identified as "an inquiry approach, which is based on constructivist principles." The documents to which one looks for the articulation of curriculum turn out to be presentations of a pedagogical doctrine, constructivism, much in dispute and which has appropriated to itself the dubious slogan and sales pitch "Best Practice." Most board members don't know what "constructivist" means and, if they read that far in the *Curriculum Guidelines*, they don't ask. Constructivism refers to the half-truth that full understanding occurs only when students learn for themselves from hands-on experience without direct instruction or teacher intervention.

I cannot draw general conclusions about American education from the above description of Mt. Abraham Union High School and of the supervisory union district it forms with five elementary schools. I have observed only this one case. At conferences where I have presented some of these materials, other participants have not hesitated to respond, "That's a pretty good description of my district." I have not myself surveyed other schools and districts.

By going back to school as a board member, I have come to the conclusion that my school and its district have no ascertainable curriculum and no effective curriculum document. Various sources continue to provide topics to be taught—individual teachers, lesson plans, habit, informal consultation, tradition, inertia. Even without the guidance of a curriculum, education goes on. Teachers teach. Students learn. They may even study. Budgets are voted in. The caravan passes. But all is not well. Is there anything to be done?

2.

During the two years it took me to discover the absence of an adequate curriculum at Mt. Abraham Union High School, I was also trying to reeducate myself about public education, elementary and secondary. I subscribed to magazines—*American School Board Journal*, *Teacher Magazine*, *Educational Leadership*. I discovered all over again

in books the intellectual excitement churned up by the history of education. That subject embraces the survival of democratic institutions, the conflicting claims of reason and religion, the nature of human cognitive development, the importance of personal leadership, and the constant distraction of intellectual fashion. (At the moment, we cringe or bask in the glare of several fashions: multiple intelligences, constructivism or discovery learning, personalized learning, and critical or higher-order thinking. They are all powerful half-truths.)

My reeducation in education led me to a curious discovery. At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, two famous yet now partially forgotten experiments in education were going on at the same time unbeknownst to each other.

One experiment was in effect a bold rescue mission beginning in 1887 to save a lost girl from incarceration inside her own body. A seven-year-old named Helen Keller, both deaf and blind, responded irrepressibly to the teaching genius of Anne Sullivan, barely in her twenties. Helen learned to communicate and to read through her fingers. Then she could discover and experience the teeming world around her not only by touch but also through the miracle of books. Helen completed *The Story of My Life* at age twenty-three in 1903 and graduated *cum laude* from Radcliffe College the following year. The psychological, cognitive, and pedagogical significance of the Keller-Sullivan experiment has been explored afresh since 2003, on the centenary of her first book.^[1] This astonishing case history and parable belong as much to science as to folklore and to literature.

By now, you may have recalled the other major educational experiment at the turn of the century.

In 1894 the enterprising president of the newly founded University of Chicago recruited from the University of Michigan a thirty-five-year-old philosophy professor to become head of the combined Departments of Philosophy, Psychology, and Pedagogy. During his ten previous years at the University of Michigan, John Dewey had published a stream of articles and four books in philosophy, psychology, and social thought, earning himself a sturdy national reputation. Three circumstances—the natural development of his research, his marriage to a brilliant teacher who was his intellectual equal, and the birth of their three children in whose upbringing he took an active interest—combined to steer Dewey strongly toward education. At Chicago, he threw himself into pedagogy projects and decided that, like any self-respecting science, the field of education needs a laboratory, an experimental setting, in which to develop and test its hypotheses. Dewey rapidly funded, founded, and staffed the University Elementary School, soon to be known as the Laboratory School, with himself as principal, his wife on the staff, and their children attending. The school opened in 1895 with sixteen students and closed in 1903 with 140.

Dewey soon referred to the goal of the project as the "New Education." His teaching and publishing in philosophy and psychology did not come to a standstill, but education, pedagogy, and school administration devoured more and more of his time and energy. He ventured out himself in search of schoolroom desks and chairs not made to be screwed to

the floor. He talked willingly to parents' and teachers' groups about plans for the school. Dewey's modesty and dedication won him growing loyalty. He associated the mission of his laboratory school with the social ideas and reforms being tried out at that time by his friend Jane Addams at the Hull House settlement in the slums of Chicago.

Dewey also watched a little apprehensively as the celebrated educator Colonel Francis Parker, originally brought in from Quincy, Massachusetts, to direct the Chicago Normal School, was being set up by International Harvester money in his own private institute with an attached practice elementary school. Dewey recognized the flamboyant Parker, thirty years his senior, as the "father of progressive education." Then the University of Chicago, in what looked like a brilliant move, incorporated Parker's institute and elementary school and endowment into its own programs. Parker conveniently died the following year, in 1902. The two elementary schools merged for a year under the Deweys and then foundered in misunderstandings and inevitable turf wars. In 1904 Dewey accepted an offer from Columbia University in New York. His pedagogical experiment was over.

More seriously and consequentially than I have done by serving on a school board in Vermont, Dewey went back to school in his late thirties. He built and ran a laboratory, showplace, proving-ground school whose eight-year history has been told in one major book and a large number of biographies and articles. What concerns us here is what Dewey himself learned by going back to school in this enterprising, private, yet essentially democratic experiment. Fortunately, Dewey left reliable documentation allowing us to answer that question. Three major statements—two pamphlets and a lecture series—cover the life span of the Laboratory School. And they represent three critical points along the graph of Dewey's evolving thought.

Barely a year after the opening of the University Elementary School, Dewey issued a short pamphlet, "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), every paragraph of which begins "I believe...." One of the most widely republished and translated of Dewey's writings, this brash manifesto displays the reformist zeal that fired his search and research for the "New Education." Since the manifesto format required no discursive argument and no narrative or descriptive line, synopsis does not represent the pamphlet as well as judicious quotation. Here is Dewey in "My Pedagogic Creed" clearing the intellectual ground for his experimental school:

The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education.

I believe, therefore, that the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities. I believe that there is, therefore, no succession of studies in the ideal school curriculum.^[2]

"My Pedagogic Creed" was a tendentious aberration in Dewey's writings, one he soon put behind him. The editor of a widely available collection, *John Dewey on Education*

(Modern Library, 1964), makes the error of giving this early essay unmerited importance by placing it last.

Two years later, in 1899, Dewey published *The School and Society*, a one-hundred-page book made up of three lectures and six related articles and talks. By this time Dewey's school had provoked skeptical comments about undisciplined students running wild and learning only what they wished. *The School and Society* adopted a slightly defensive tone in discussing discipline, the need for carefully sequenced subject matter, and the deplorable "Waste" of duplication and omission that occurs without such a sequence of studies. This short book abandoned the edict-like declarations of "My Pedagogic Creed" and sought commonsense solutions to the problems of running an experimental school. In these pages one also begins to hear two new and unexpected verbs: to "direct" and to "control" the child's activities.

After three more years at the Laboratory School, Dewey returned to the pamphlet format to set down his thoughts, but not to the earlier stentorian style. "The Child and the Curriculum" has been reedited and translated almost as frequently as "My Pedagogic Creed." Here is a synopsis of the opening pages of "The Child and the Curriculum."

According to Dewey, education rests on two interacting factors: the floating immature mind of the child and the organized knowledge of the adult. In practice, schools tend to separate these two factors into antagonists representing two opposing sides: the child versus the curriculum. These opposites thrust themselves forward by making extreme claims: "The child is the starting point, the center, and the end" versus "Subject-matter furnishes the end and it determines the method." Each side asserts an educational reductionism that seeks to eliminate its rival.

Dewey seems almost to relish this joust. He prolongs it for two more paragraphs before issuing his own challenge: "What then is the problem?" he barks, deciding to break up the fight. He does not mean: "Why can't you come up with a winner after all this fighting?" He means: "Why can't you see that both sides must win?" Having observed the development of his Laboratory School for six years, Dewey now concludes that he wants it to be *simultaneously* child-centered and curriculum-centered. He is not proposing a compromise or an appeasement. He is promoting two complementary viewpoints. The logician in Dewey found the analogy of a continuum connecting apparent, not real, opposites. What he wrote deserves to be looked at carefully:

What, then, is the problem? It is just to get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind (as distinct from degree) between the child's experience and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study. From the side of the child, it is a question of seeing how his experience already contains within itself elements—facts and truths—of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study; and, what is of more importance, of how it [the child's experience] contains within itself the attitudes, the motives, and the interests which have operated in developing and organizing the subject-

matter to the plane which it now occupies. From the side of the studies, it is a question of interpreting them as outgrowths of forces operating in the child's life, and of discovering the steps that intervene between the child's present experience and their richer maturity. ...The child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies.

Has Dewey now solved the problem of the child and the curriculum, either for 1902 or for 2005? No indeed. But something has happened. By going back to school, to his own school, Dewey allowed practice to guide theory to a sturdy synthesis. As Louis Menand has insisted in his fine discussion of Dewey in *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), this reconciliation of opposites, of half-truths, into one "organic circuit" or whole truth exhibits the basic mental move of Dewey's soundest philosophy. Education in particular flourishes more on inclusion than on exclusion of elements. The Laboratory School under Dewey set and maintained a year-by-year curriculum to guide the developing experience of the children.

This major development in Dewey's thought and practice points back to my original quandary and presents a balanced understanding of the role of "the organized bodies of truth that we call studies"—that is, a coherent curriculum. As I have shown, Dewey made contradictory statements on the subject. But "The Child and the Curriculum" grew directly out of his one substantial experience in running an elementary school. For that reason the essay is one of his most clearheaded statements on education.

3.

Newly elected to a union school board in Vermont, I learned that in six hundred pages of official documents there is no attempt to lay out a curriculum; the pages contain hortatory statements about goals and teaching approaches. Though still apparently functioning, such a program of studies is essentially rudderless. I went on to explore Vermont statutes and regulations pertaining to curriculum. These perfunctory-sounding rules distribute power and responsibility among three parties: state, district, and individual schools.

The legislature has assigned to the State Board of Education the responsibility to set standards for student performance, and to the sixty supervisory union boards in the state the responsibility "to coordinate curriculum plans among the sending and receiving schools" in their districts. The *School Quality Standards* issued by the Vermont Department of Education stipulate: "Each school shall make continual and steady progress in the alignment of local curriculum consistent with the [State] Framework [of Standards] or comparable standards" and "each school shall evaluate and review the curriculum on a periodic basis."

I interpret this overlapping legal language to mean that responsibility for setting curriculum lies with "each school," subject to the "coordination" of the supervisory union

board and in accordance with state standards. Thus the principle of local control remains unmentioned and presumably unchallenged. District boards can only "coordinate" the curricula of district schools; the state board can establish only "standards" for the schools' curricula. Those state standards are deliberately kept vague, if not empty, for fear of infringing on local control.

In practice, the result is an elaborate game of "*Après vous, Gaston*." Everyone gestures to the other parties to go first through the door of setting a genuine course of study. In my district, the *Curriculum Guidelines* in each content area are drawn up by a committee representing all five elementary schools, one high school, and the superintendent's office. Great pains are taken to make the *Guidelines* "standards-based" —that is, attentive to ("aligned with") the state *Framework of Standards* as well as "coordinated" among different schools. In this elaborate ritual of deciding on the curriculum at three levels — local, supervisory union, and state— all specific content drains away. Scores of people in Montpelier and in every one of the sixty Vermont districts spend weeks thinking up fuzzy professional language to compensate for the absence of a specific curriculum.

High over the general melee I have been describing hovers the great raptor: I refer to the elusive yet commanding term "standards." No one can define them. No one can oppose them. No one can explain why they have virtually driven out curriculum. But is the mystery so great? In my understanding of our language, a standard (a required level of attainment in a defined activity) cannot exist in education without a curriculum to define the activity or field of study. We cannot "set the bar" higher or lower unless everyone involved knows the rules of the game and how to measure inches and feet.

Somehow the laborious, confusing, six-hundred-page "standards-based curriculum" drawn up for my Vermont district does not prevent a basic education from reaching a fair number of students in Vermont. Still, I'm convinced that we could do better and also save time and money.

All this I learned during four years sitting on two school boards.

What Dewey learned by going back to school can be told more briefly. He knew more to begin with. He learned to acknowledge not one but two centers in school: both the child and the subject matter to be taught to the child. He found the fit between those two half-truths. Between 1896 and 1902 in Chicago, Dewey changed his mind and recognized the need for a coherent K–12 curriculum.

Furthermore, his conversion to a sequenced, specific curriculum throws light on a complaint often heard today about standardized tests: namely, that tests oblige teachers to teach to the test. But just reflect for a minute. The reason for teaching to the test is not the mandated existence of tests. It is the lamentable absence of a clear curriculum. *If there's no coherent curriculum to teach to and to base tests on, then one has to teach to the test.* Here lies the great pedagogical short-circuit and break-down, brought on by the empty

promises and dummy documents called "standards." Without a specific curriculum, there can be no standards.

4.

I don't have to go back to the Greeks and Romans, or to the trivium and quadrivium, in order to make the simple point that today the only way to assure sustained attention to a true liberal arts program in a school is to embed it in the curriculum adopted by the school. A teacher here and there trying out Ovid or Dickens or a chapter of Tocqueville may ignite the intellectual curiosity of a few students and deserves every encouragement. But a curriculum that specifies a judicious selection of great books and perennial topics will allow that intellectual excitement to spread farther and to attain the added rewards of "commonality." Yet I have visited class after class in which the choice of reading is left entirely to the student. Commonality of reading and study, not to be confused with lock-step, is neglected in favor of student choice and personalized learning.

Now, I am not so optimistic as to believe that my supervisory union district will soon develop a genuine curriculum, and even a liberal arts program. I do not foresee that sixty-five teachers at Mt. Abraham Union High School, seconded by the district board and the Mt. Abe board and the teachers of the five feeder elementary schools along with their boards, will soon decide to draft a grade-by-grade, content-rich, specific, flexible, teacher-friendly, and teacher-proof curriculum—and then be able to adopt it.

Yet I believe that the accompanying deliberations would stir up the school and parents in a healthy and fruitful way. I would love to hear members of our community discussing the Founding Fathers and *Huckleberry Finn*, and the separation of Church and State.

There is an alternative. It's even a legal and simple course of action, though uncommon. The overriding principle here, partly embodied as I have shown in statutory law, is local control. Each school sets its own curriculum, coordinates it with other schools' curriculums in the district as directed by the superintendent, and bases it on *Vermont's Framework of Standards*. Nothing says a school or a district has to draft and write its curriculum document from scratch. And right here my Vermont district displays a certain timidity and conformity in regularly revising its own curriculum guidelines. The existing documents are prevented from providing a specific grade-by-grade content by their arrangement into three clumps of four grades each. As can be seen from the excerpts presented [here \(excerpt 1\)](#), the very layout of these documents precludes a sequential curriculum.

The alternative would set aside existing Vermont curriculum documents. My district can examine and evaluate and finally select one from among a number of independent, off-the-shelf curricula now available, both public and proprietary. The New York State Board of Regents, the International Baccalaureate, New Standards, Success for All, the Edison Project, the Core Knowledge Sequence, Direct Instruction, America's Choice, New American Schools—all these programs make differing claims, including comprehensive

school reform. I have spent much time in the past three years searching for and scrutinizing these programs and their curricula.

I have found only one curriculum that moves grade by grade (in this case K–8), that uses simple lists of specific content, that does not prescribe teaching methods, that is cross-referenced, and that turns out to be informative and even a pleasure to read. The *Core Knowledge Sequence* (now in its third edition), prepared and published by the Core Knowledge Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia, accomplishes all this in a no-frills two hundred-page booklet adopted since 1986 by 480 schools and under consideration by four hundred. The moving spirit here is the dedicated teacher-scholar E.D. Hirsch.^[3] Everyone concerned about what is being taught in our public schools should examine the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. The considered selection of such a curriculum by my district would represent the full and proper exercise of local control and a means of coordinating the preparation of students in the five elementary schools feeding Mt. Abe.

The excerpts reproduced [here \(excerpt 2\)](#) from the *Core Knowledge Sequence* reveals how straightforwardly this curriculum document lists subjects and content items.^[4] For some schools and for some teachers, so specific a program of study represents a fundamental change, almost a conversion, and would have to be carefully implemented. With the help of the Core Knowledge Foundation School Department, hundreds of schools have made the transition. For the most part, teachers, students, parents, and administrators have been satisfied with the results. In a school setting it helps enormously when all parties can find out easily just what is being taught in any course and how the sequence fits together to cover the ground.^[5]

Listen once more to the Vermont Department of Education "Quality Standards":

Each School shall make continual and steady progress in the alignment of local curriculum consistent with the [State] Framework [of Standards] or comparable standards and articulated across all grades.

I have underlined "or comparable standards." I read the offered alternative, "comparable standards," as a virtual invitation to schools to do better than state and district documents have done in articulating the curriculum "across all grades." Vermont has offered its school districts and schools the opportunity to choose the best off-the-shelf curriculum. I'm not a paid lobbyist. I merely hope to demonstrate to my district with its six schools and seven boards, and to anyone concerned with school curriculum, that the *Core Knowledge Sequence* embodies the dynamic balance that Dewey discovered while running the Laboratory School, the balance between the developing child and the mature curriculum.

And just think, students in my district and in other districts might learn to understand references to my proposal as "quixotic." For, in the *Core Knowledge Sequence* that I am

championing, episodes from Cervantes's novel appear prominently in the fifth-grade English curriculum.

[Excerpt 1](#)

[Excerpt 2](#)

[Excerpt 3](#)

[Excerpt 4](#)

Notes

^[1] See my restored editions of Helen Keller's two most revealing and beautifully written books: *The Story of My Life*, edited with Dorothy Herrmann (Norton, 2003) and *The World I Live In* (New York Review Books, 2003).

^[2] See John Dewey, *Dewey on Education: Selections*, edited and with an introduction by Martin S. Dworkin (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1959), pp. 20, 25, 27.

^[3] For an article describing his general approach, see his "The Primal Scene in Education," *The New York Review*, March 2, 1989.

^[4] Additional extracts from this text as well as from *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities* are published in the Web version of this article, [excerpt 3](#) and [excerpt 4](#). An earlier and shorter version of this essay appeared in *The Journal of Education*, Vol. 184 (November 2, 2003).

^[5] Full information on the activities and publications (including videos) of the Core Knowledge Foundation is available at its Web site: www.coreknowledge.org.