

Are We Wasting Four Years?

By Lee Jenkins

Lee@LtoJConsulting.com

11445 E. Via Linda, 2-480, Scottsdale, AZ 85259
480-659-4096

The blame game abounds in education with one consistency—the blamers never think they are the problem. Since it is always somebody else wreaking havoc, we are determined to punish those causing the problems. If Dr. W. Edwards Deming was correct that 96 percent of the problems come from the system and 4 percent come from human error, then with increased blame and punishment we might just solve 4 percent of education's problems.

Surveys from more than 2,000 teachers collected at my education seminars show that only 4 percent of teachers report working with uncommitted colleagues. The other choices they were given were "I work on a bowling team," as in we like each other, give each other advice and add up the totals once a year; "I work with people doing their best"; or "I work in an orchestra," as in a very fine-tuned organization. Amazingly, this is the exact same percentage given by Dr. W. Edwards Deming* years ago. Clearly teachers do not see their own colleagues as the problem. I surmise, though, that if we gave the same choices to every group involved in education—legislators, administrators, board members and parents—we'd have very similar results.

However, if we were to suspend the blame game for a moment and look at the system, what would be the root causes of our system problems? Without blaming legislators, board members, administrators, teachers, students or parents, we would probably come up with more than one root cause. For this article, I'll write about one such cause: cramming and forgetting.

On average, the same 2,000 teachers surveyed estimate that they spend one-third of the school year teaching content students should already know. That adds up to 60 days a year, or four years over the life of a student's K-12 education. Is it possible we are wasting four years of education? Is the public paying for 13 years of education and receiving only eight years?

Before I continue, don't become defensive. No one currently in education created the "cram, get-a-grade, forget" cycle—it was inherited and woven into the very fabric of American education. "Permission to forget"*** is a major component of America's educational system, yet it is within the power of today's educators to remove this permission. We can take away the possibility of cramming, forcing students to have no choice but learn the content.

Students do not come to kindergarten by cramming, nor do they learn how to cram in that first year. They learn how to cram in first grade through spelling. (Remember that we are not blaming—first-grade teachers are not setting out to destroy real learning. They inherited the spelling program.) In 3-4 weeks, 6-year-old children learn they do not need to know the words beyond that Friday. That same knowledge is then carried forward into chapter tests, which reveals a broken system.

I have interviewed hundreds of teacher candidates, none of whom ever told me their career goal was to have students cram and get good grades—they all wanted students to learn. After a short time in education, however, these teachers realize that students don't remember much of the content from prior grade levels, yet egos cause these same teachers to believe that the students are learning what they are teaching. Not so. The students learned how to work the system in first-grade spelling, a process more powerful than teachers.

Then how do we fix the system? The basic process would be to provide students with a list of essential content for a course on the first day of class. Students are then assessed most weeks on this end-of-the-year content, based on a randomly selected sample from the year's essential content. The expectation is that by the end of the first quarter students will prove knowledge of 25 percent of the essential content, will demonstrate they have 50 percent of the content in their long-term memory by semester and so on until they show mastery of the full year's content. This process works at all grade levels and with all subjects.

Since it's spelling in which American students are first taught to cram, it is reasonable to give a few details for spelling. Codi Hrouda's fourth-grade classroom in Columbus, Neb., is assessed on 24 spelling words each week out of a total of 450. When the students number their papers 1-24, they never know which words are coming out of the list of 450. However, they know that in the first quarter they are expected to spell six words correctly, by semester 12, by third quarter 18 and at year's end they should spell all 24 right. The words are placed in a hamster ball and drawn one at a time during the spelling test. After the spelling test, the words are re-deposited into the hamster ball, allowing any word to come up any week. This is causing students to learn at a young age that a string of 100 percent papers is not real learning; it's merely evidence of good cramming. Real learning is a continual incline from not knowing the content to mastering the content.

Critics might say, "But I want to know if the students learned what I taught them this week." The problem with this comment, though, is teachers are fooled into thinking the students learned the content when they really didn't because it has only been placed into their short-term memory. Real feedback to teachers regarding student learning comes much later. Sometimes the feedback is positive, such as: "Wow, we studied that concept six weeks ago and 90 percent of the students remembered." Or sometimes the feedback is not so positive: "I can't

believe that only 40 percent of the students know what we studied two months ago.” Pacing is then adjusted based on the data.

Ideally, the system requires retention beyond the current year. For example, it is common for weekly math quizzes to have seven questions from the current year, two from the prior year and one from two years previous. For example, high school geometry teachers would ask seven questions from the geometry essential content, two from Algebra I and one question from middle school. Just think how Algebra II would change if students were required by the geometry teachers to remember Algebra I.

I hypothesize that we are wasting four years with the “cram, get-a-grade, forget” cycle, but what can we do? Here’s my advice:

To legislators and State Department of Education staff: Clearly articulate what percentage of state assessments are from the current year or course and what percentage comes from prior courses. For example, the state biology exam should be approximately 70 percent biology and 30 percent prior courses.

To superintendents and central office staff: Take away “permission to forget one subject at a time” until it is entirely removed from the district. Teachers need time to change their thinking about how the system of education is not aligned with their desire for students to learn. Plus they need help assessing long-term memory; it is a very different process, and the major textbook publishers are not yet helping.

To principals and teachers: Use staff development time to learn how to recover as much of the four wasted years as possible. Start each new year teaching the new content for the year with review of prior years built into each weekly non-graded assessment. This may mean skipping most of the early textbook chapters.

In the United States when things go wrong we ask “why” until we find a “who.” If we never stopped with a “who” and continued on our investigations of “why,” we have the collective intelligence to solve real problems—and stop wasting time playing the blame game.

Lee Jenkins is a full-time author and consultant living in Scottsdale, Ariz. He is the author of Permission to Forget and Improving Student Learning. He can be reached at Lee@LtoJConsulting.com.

Author of *Out of the Crisis* and *The New Economics

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