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Guest Column

## The \$100 Billion Problem: Permitting Forgetfulness

by **Lee Jenkins**

The United States spends approximately \$100 billion every year teaching students content they should already know. How did I arrive at this figure? I have surveyed hundreds of teachers from many states with the question: What portion of the school year do you spend teaching students content they should already know? The average answer is 60 days.

The math is simple. U.S. schools cost approximately \$2 billion a day to operate, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, so \$100 billion is not an exaggeration.

Even worse, students spend four years of their K-12 education in review and teachers spend approximately 10 years of their career teaching students content they already should have mastered.

Why is so much time spent on review of previously taught material? It's due to a serious disconnect between practice and expectations. Universities and other segments of society judge high school graduates on their long-term memory, standardized exams judge schools on students' long-term memory, and each subsequent level of education judges the prior schools on students' long-term memory.

### Eliminate Cramming

In our culture, study does not mean learn. It means cram. The very professor who complains about ill-prepared college freshmen is, on the very same day, creating an exam to assess university students' cramming abilities. This disconnect shows up at all levels of education.

This problem, which I call "permission to forget" (and for which I hold the trademark), begins in 1st-grade with spelling. Kindergarten pupils do not normally cram, but 1st-graders do on Thursday nights all over America. Unconsciously, American education practices are telling students they have permission to forget. Any teacher who follows the typical math textbook is giving students permission to forget as the first third of the textbook is a review of prior years' content. I urge educators to skip the first third of the math textbook.

Please declare that permission to forget is dead and buried in your school or school system. Next go about rooting out all measurements of short-term memory. Because the cramming process begins with spelling tests, I'll start the explanation of how to accomplish this with spelling, one of education's top shortcomings.

To eliminate cramming in the study of spelling, I would use the following steps:

- Provide students a list of the spelling words for the year and all prior years.

- Teach spelling in a logical sequence.
- Assess weekly a sample of the words from the whole year. In 1st grade randomly select 10 words from the complete list of 100 words. In 5th grade a teacher might randomly select 18 words from the current year and another seven words from prior grades. Admittedly, few students will score 100 percent correct in the beginning of the year because long-term memory is being assessed.

Usually these quizzes are not graded, but if they are, they must be done so fairly. At nine weeks, students are expected to spell 100 percent of the words from prior grades and 25 percent of the words from the current grade.

### Student Clamoring

Beyond spelling, every teacher of every subject in every grade can declare that Permission to Forget™ is dead. Every Algebra II graded exam and every Algebra II non-graded quiz should be approximately 70 percent from the whole year's Algebra II content and 30 percent from the prior math, including last year's geometry. The 11th grade history students should be held accountable for their 5th and 8th grade U.S. history lessons.

When a high school Spanish teacher in a school where I was consulting explained to her 4th year students the formula above, the students clamored, "That's not fair. You didn't tell us when we were freshmen we had to remember this!" The teacher replied, "I'm sorry; I didn't know **Lee Jenkins** existed when you were freshmen. You have to remember." Three months later they were asked about not having permission to forget. They reluctantly admitted the system works.

Not long ago I was involved in some last-minute preparations for a seminar I was leading when a teacher relayed to me her morning conversation with her daughter. Mom told the daughter she wouldn't be teaching that day because she was attending a seminar with **Lee Jenkins**. Daughter replied, "I hate that **Lee Jenkins**." Mom was surprised, knowing her daughter had never met me. Then the daughter explained that her high school teachers attended one of my seminars and now students were expected to remember everything.

### Root Causes

All of society's ills are brought to the public schools of America in search of a solution. When answers don't come easily, educators fail to dig deeply into the root causes. Granting permission to forget was not caused by society at large, nor will it be solved by society. Permission to forget was created by prior generations of educators and inherited by today's educators. It must be destroyed by today's educators.

The \$100 billion annual toll is a huge amount, but the four years of a child's education and 10 years of a teacher's professional life are a much larger cost. Our people are too important to allow permission to forget to continue. No amount of A's on chapter tests driven by short-term memory will add up to success on long-term learning required for life (and NCLB).

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