

California Key-note, Charles Arthur, Director, Arthur Academies, Portland, Oregon
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Title: Two Unrecognized Historic Advances in Teaching.

Summary:

Within the last thirty years, two historic advances in teaching have taken place that have gone unrecognized by our public school systems. As a result, we have not begun to reach our full potential for success in teaching our children.

These advances have been brought about over the last thirty years by new programs that, among other things, ensure daily success and accelerated progress for all young children.

Because charter schools can be and must be more responsive to all the possibilities in teaching, they are in a position to take advantage of these advances and to make a huge difference in public education, now and in the future.

Intro.

Excited to be here to speak to California's best.

I'd like to talk about teaching and try to provide some historical perspective from my own experience, a perspective on where we are, what we can do now in comparison to 30-40 years ago.

I'm especially excited about being in California because I'm returning after 40 years. I came from points east to this state in the summer of 1964 to find my place in the world. Isn't that why most people come to California? And California did its job well for me. It did help me find my place. I'm grateful.

Forty years ago, I had just graduated from the University of Illinois. I had a masters degree in music and had enrolled in a school of theology. I had grand visions and expectations. Our school was just down the road from here on the hillside between Covina and Pomona. It has since moved to Berkley. *****
There is no sign of that school now, cleared and flattened for apartments and office space. Only in California? Or is this what's happening everywhere?

I first started teaching in Campbell, California, just outside of San Jose. My little school is no longer there, cleared for apartments and office space. Not flattened. It was already flat.

In Oregon, at least in Portland, we can't even cut one tree down. One of the first things we were ask in planning a charter school facility was: will you be cutting any trees?

I never thought that my place in the world would be in teaching young children.

It was a little like the 60's movie, "Man for all Seasons" where Thomas Moore tells his student, "Be a teacher". His student didn't do it. Teaching was not important enough for him.

I felt the same way in my time, at first, but luckily I did get the message and discovered how wrong I was. California did its job well with this poor easterner.

What I want to do this morning is to share with you, from my experience and point of view, what I think has been two historic advances in teaching within my time,
advances that have been mostly overlooked by our public school system.

As a result of this oversight, we have not begun to reach our full potential, a potential that, I'm convinced, at least at the building level, can be reached.

I'd like to talk about the two teaching advances, then identify what I think has been their major cause, and, finally, talk about the unique part charter schools can play. I'm going to talk about these advancements in the order in which I experienced them not in the order in which they occurred.

- I. The first historic advance, that I participated in, has to do with our ability to teach older elementary and middle school students, who have failed a lot in school and are way behind grade level.

Most of my teaching career has been spent working with this population in various settings, first in Massachusetts and then back to Oregon.

When I first focused on kids with these problems in the mid 70's, after being a school counselor for a short time, there was very little known about how we could teach children that were like this. There had been some increased interest in the subject by then. This was when the national special education laws were being formed. To most teachers, teaching these kids seemed hopeless. For one thing, most of them had serious emotional and behavior problems - not surprising. The other common characteristic was that they were very poor readers. (Lots of frustration and anger.)

One of the first lessons that I learned, along with many others, was that if I could give them some success in the classroom, especially in reading, they would be a lot happier. Most of these kids wanted to succeed.

My first attempt at teaching children with these troubles was with a team of teachers within a pull-out resource room setting in the little town of Ipswich, Ma. Our work here was similar to many other resource rooms at the time. Under these conditions, in very small groups, we were able to find ways to stop the loss of ground, stop the downward spiral of failure.

We couldn't find a way to make up for loses from their preceding years of schooling, but we could stop the bleeding. Most of our kids would gain a year within a year. They felt better; they were not failing anymore, but we knew that they would still be in trouble as they moved up the grades and would most likely be dependent on special programs throughout their schooling, because of being so far behind.

Clearly, this was not good enough. We had to do better.

In another location, closer into Boston, I started using some new programs in a middle school, special education program that specifically targeted and were designed for this population. These were exciting programs that also provided the daily success (as we had been doing before) but, in addition, they enabled the students to accelerate progress enough to actually regained lost ground. This was big; It would be a major, advance in the field, I thought, if it could be replicated.

Back in Oregon, after continuing this work, it eventually became very clear to me that we had found a way to teach so that kids in the middle school that were way behind could not only be turned around and begin to be successful but also could make up lost ground from previous failing years. They could gain two years for every year taught. And you can imagine the positive affect that this kind of improvement had on their lives.

Because of this advance in teaching, kids with serious problems, way behind in reading skills in middle school, can now catch-up most of their lost ground before HS. The advantages of this are obvious. This was a major accomplishment that I had observed.

So, because of this, we can say, it's now no longer a matter of not knowing what to do and how to do it. We now have the programs and the know-how. It's now just a matter of doing it. (I know that there has been some movement on this front, but not nearly enough to really attack this problem.)

However, even with these improvements at the middle school level, there still was a question that persisted in my mind. It was: given the fact that these kids had learned to read so late in school, how much could they really catch up to their peers? Given these improvements, what could really be expected in HS? Was there still some degree of enduring handicap and disadvantage? They had lost out on a large amount of volume reading that their peers had gained over the first several years of school. Volume reading, over time, provides broad information, vocabulary, general language skills and knowledge, all of which is greatly needed in HS classes. Making up these broader areas is harder to do and takes more time. (Cunningham, Ann, & Stanovich, Kieth (1998). What reading does for the mind. *American Educator*, Spring/Summer, 1-8.)

So, because of this question, a middle school program to rescue failing kids was still not good enough. We needed to do better. There was more to be done with this particular advance in teaching before it could be considered complete.

The idea here was to get this kind of teaching started sooner in the upper elementary grades, embedded in regular classrooms, without special education placement, so that these students, who are far behind, can begin to catch up to their peers in terms of volume reading as well as general reading skills, in preparation for HS.

I took a third grade teaching position and teamed up with a fourth grade teacher to test this out. Over five years, we found out three things.

1. High performing children could continue to excel above grade level.
2. The largest group, who were middle level readers, and who were almost always a year behind already, could catch-up two grade levels within the year and be at grade level going into fourth grade.
3. Those half dozen or so kids that were still essentially non-readers could gain two grade levels in the third grade and close to two more in the fourth grade to be very close to grade level by the end of fourth grade.

We did this for five years and got the same results. And, best of all, no child needed to be placed in special education.

This program got kids who were well behind into improved reading before middle school, increased their volume of reading, and, therefore, saved them from moving onto middle school still way behind. Now this advance was complete. Now we can really say:

It is now no longer a matter of not knowing what to do and how to do it. It's now just a matter of doing it. Children left behind can be rescued. But again, no one in our district picked up on it, and few have elsewhere.

II. This was the first historic advance that I felt fortunate to play a small part in. But it really wasn't the most important advance made during this time. The second historic advance actually preceded the first nationally. I just happened to experience it much later, in the late 90's. This advance is far more important because it involves being able to prevent failure in the first place.

I had heard and read about this possibility. I had read the reports. I had read the new books: Marilyn Adam's book, Beginning Reading, many other research books published in the 90's, the research reports from Ried Lyons of the NIHCD, and finally the National Reading Panel report. They all stressed the need to start early. For example: the National Institute of Health and Child Development reported that it takes four times as much assistance to improve a child's reading skills if help is delayed until fourth grade.

These reports also claimed that most failures in learning how to read can now be prevented. This was a new development that I wanted to take part in before leaving the profession. I wanted to find out for myself about this possibility.

My partner and I proposed a three-year project for first and second grade, completely using the programs of our choice. This had never been done before in our district. We got the permission, but not the money. So we wrote grant applications and raised the money ourselves, over 25k over a three-year period, beginning in 1997.

Some results: the first grade classes improved from below the 20th percentile in the fall to above the 65th percentile in the spring, each year in reading. (very similar results in math)
[Show slide 1.]

But this still wasn't the real thing. I wanted kindergarten. I wanted to know what could happen here. The programs that we used were designed to start at kindergarten. This took a charter school, which I started in 2002. My wife and I have shared in teaching the kindergarten class. Here are the result of two of our classes for the first two years.

[Results: show slides 2, and 3.]

Basically the same results were observed as first grade, but it was done in kindergarten. And now all our kindergarteners read. No failures. What a head start in their schooling!!!!

This of course is a profound advance, an incredible claim. But, I have to tell you, it's been on record for over thirty years in research studies and in the experience of teachers in many schools.

I found out personally, for myself, that it's true. We can say, for the young child in the early grades,

It's now no longer a matter of not knowing what to do or how to do it.

It's now just a matter of doing it.

But it is still not picked up on by most of our school systems.

HOW WAS IT DONE? What has been the cause of these advances?

What kind of teaching has made them possible?

In my opinion, the kind of teaching that is responsible for these advances is a direct, mastery approach.

We now have comprehensive and detailed programs available, for this way of teaching that enables teachers to get these results.

I don't have time here to give many details. A very good description can be found in the effective teaching research studies reported by Jere Brophy and Barok Rosenshine in the 3rd ed. of the Handbook for Research in Teaching, 1986. As a doctoral student at Boston College, I remember how excited I was when I discovered this body of research. I thought that this would really create changes. Wrong again. This research has gone no where in spite of the good results reported. This way of teaching is simply not popular. I doubt that it ever will be.

For those who wish to take advantage of this way of teaching, we know that it can enable teachers to accomplish two things with young children at the beginning or older children who are way behind.

1. As I've said, they assure DAILY SUCCESS FOR EACH CHILD. i.e., they make sure that whatever a child is asked to do and learn, he or she will be able to master, within that lesson.
If a child is not having DAILY SUCCESS in our schools, we would consider this a teaching and programming failure and would work until it is fixed.
2. At the same time, this kind of teaching accelerates progress from lesson to lesson very gradually.

This means that every day, every child that you are teaching, by the end of every lesson, gets it. And that every lesson inches forward little by little at a steady pace. It may not seem at the time that much progress is being made, but by the end of a month, a half year, a year, you will see that the progress has been accelerated without the child even realizing that the lessons have gotten harder. Teaching like this represents a profound change in our age and, in my opinion, represents a huge advance in the field.

What does this mean about the construction of curriculum programs?

Programs like this are not easy to construct. They take a lot of work and a lot of trying out, lots of research and development.

If a program can accomplish these goals, it means that it will be constructed with well defined lessons that carefully and systematically and very clearly progress from..

Easy, simple and somewhat contrived to...
What is more difficult, complicated and more realistic
All progressing very gradually.

"The chief art of learning, as Locke has observed, is to attempt but little at a time. The widest excursions of the mind are made by short flights frequently repeated; the most lofty fabrics of science are formed by the continued accumulation of single propositions."

Samuel Johnson (July 9, 1751)

The ideas here may not be all that new, but it's taken a long to be applied. The level of analysis and research that breaks down subject matter sufficiently into appropriate activities is a complicated science in itself, but it now has been done and can now be put into the hands of teachers, which enables the child to be successful every day and still gain long term accelerated progress.

In my opinion, it is the construction and development of programs with these qualities, put in the hands of skillful teachers, that have made these advances in teaching possible. Good teachers, no matter how good, need good tools to work with to be really successful. Programs, that meet these qualifications, must be there in the hands of skillful teachers to get these results. As teachers, we have always known that the curriculum counts.

Think about what this means to the children. They begin to believe that they can do and learn whatever is given to them at school, and, over time, they can see, for themselves, what they have accomplished. Because.....(as we like to say)

WITH COMPETENCE COMES CONFIDENCE.

They begin to believe in themselves. No fear of failure.

Think what this means to the Teacher?

With appropriate instructional tools in their hands, with their skilled application, the teacher can believe that all their students will learn.

They can trust the programs.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that our public school systems, for the most part, have not yet picked up on these teaching advances and possibilities. And therefore, have not begun to reach the full potential for success in teaching our children.

This seems to be the character of our school systems. I don't know how this plays out in California, given the state adopted curriculum, but it's been my observation that public institutions, by-in-large, tend not to want to take risks and do things very different than anyone else. They generally judge how good a program is by how popular it is. It's like they want to know what the next big thing is. Taking risks on unpopular programs is typically not done.

They also don't like options within their own system.

As we all know, charter schools now offer the options. Charter schools are freer to take political risks and reach for greater possibilities. They don't care how different they are. They must take this kind of risk because they cannot risk student failure. You all know how this works.

Charter schools are in a position to take advantage of these two teaching advances and to make a huge difference in public education, now and in the future. Let's not miss this historic opportunity while it is still available.

So I challenge you all. Don't be satisfied until all of your students are finding success EVERYDAY, and are progressing as fast as they are capable. If you do, you will be taking advantage of these profound teaching advances made in our age.

To summarize, where do we stand now when it comes to teaching older elementary and middle school children and young beginners necessary basic academic skills. It's safe to say....

We are now in a new position because.....

It's now no longer a matter of not knowing what to do or how to do it.

We now know it can be done. Now it's a matter of getting it done.

If I can add a small plug.

If you're looking for a place yourself, we are opening two new schools this fall. Get in touch with me.

Arthuracademy.org