Towards a Balanced State of the True Purpose of Education: PEAS

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Abstract

A wise sage once stated, “The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.” If public schools are the birthplace of future citizens and leaders, the focus on what it means to be a productive citizen must escape the contracted mindset of today’s education reform. Instead, public education needs to be reassessed, with the goal of cultivating optimal conditions for all children to grow to their full potentials.

Beginning with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and continuing through the present day with increased annual testing requirements as well as tremendous business opportunities in education, the philosophy and purpose of public education has drastically changed. Far too much emphasis is placed on test scores in literacy and math. The aftermath is that the concept of teaching children, rather than achieving scores, has been lost. While data, accountability, and assessment are important, they are not the primary means to educating our children. But at this time, at both the federal and state levels, we are experiencing a hyper-focus on ranking, sorting and test scores... and not on fully educating students.

Moving forward, a 21st century education must consist not just of academics focused heavily on math and English language arts, but of four components: Physical growth, Emotional growth, Academic growth, and Social growth – PEAS. PEAS allows children to tap into their own potentials and maximize their talents. Each component is equally as important as the others, and each also reinforces the others. And with PEAS, research shows that even with less time spent on traditional academics, academic
achievement improves, along with so much more. PEAS gives direction and guidance to the “whole child” approach so often spoken about, but so rarely successfully achieved.

Most adults understand that a sedentary work day is far from ideal, and leads to reduced output. Cutting edge corporations like Google design their work campuses to include gymnasiums, swimming pools, volleyball courts, and walking paths. Businesses provide gym memberships to their employees for use during the workday. With more movement comes more focus, less boredom, fewer absences, better attitudes, and more positive outlooks.

The trend in public school, though, has been the opposite. As the emphasis on attaining high scores in math and ELA grows, the reaction has been to increase classroom time, on the assumption that the more time spent on the subjects will correlate with better performance. All too often, that extra classroom time is pulled from recess time, or from physical education time. At the same time, the childhood obesity problem in the United States has continued to grow, being cited as parents’ number one health concern last year by the American Heart Association. Recess can no longer be thought of as a throw-away. In fact, recess is critical to children’s healthy growth, and to their successful performance in school. Children run, play, climb, swing – and smile. They connect with their peers. They are out-of-breath. When they finish their play, they are ready to be in a class again, ready to focus. And they are happy.

Research repeatedly supports that increasing physical fitness opportunities for children leads to not just improved physical health but also to increased academic growth. The Center for Disease Control has stated that “[t]here is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores.” The CDC further notes that physical activity “enhance[s] concentration and attention as well as improve[s] classroom behavior.” Even simply incorporating physical activity breaks during class increases student performance.

In addition, recess lets children actively develop the 21st century skills that are so often discussed in the education world: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. These skills are best learned and honed not in a classroom exercise, but rather on the playground, by creating an imaginary kingdom out of a shade tree with kids wearing crowns made of autumn leaves. They learn problem solving and collaborating when they figure out how to share a space or decide how to choose who participates in a game. The playground is its own microcosm, where children are the governors and citizens, who learn to play in their world together, with goals of kindness and support.

In sum, with PEAS, we understand that physical growth, via recess, physical education, and participation in afterschool sports, is just as important as academic teaching, and in
fact is integral to maximizing academic success and improving student health. When physical activity is relegated to being just a disposable, non-essential filler, our children suffer. It's time to right the wrong of reducing children’s physical activity that high-pressure testing has caused. It's unhealthy on too many levels. The United Nations Standards of Human Rights endorses that prisoners have at least an hour of outdoor exercise every day. Why don’t we allow the same right to our children in schools?

But as schools, we are remiss if we don’t ensure that children, especially our youngest, are learning in ways that create emotional health, because, in fact, a strong emotional basis is the groundwork for the academics that will follow. It is this emotional strength that will allow a child to continue to strive even when he or she is frustrated. Emotional well-being gives a child permission to fail on his or her route to success. Children will understand that feelings both positive and negative are part of the human experience and aren’t something to be feared or repressed.

So critical is this emotional growth that the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child considers it foundational: “It is essential that young children’s feelings get the same level of attention as their thinking.” This is because proper brain development -- which leads to optimal thinking skills -- depends on the fostering of emotional growth: "When feelings are not well managed, thinking can be impaired. Even more, emotional health is critical to developing strong executive functioning skills, like creating, planning, and managing."

To combat excess stress and foster emotional well-being, schools also need to offer outlets and life-long methods of coping, such as yoga and mindfulness training. These activities help children develop healthy relationships with peers and teachers, and be able to self-regulate emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally. I believe by integrating mindfulness and yoga into curriculum, it creates a number of other benefits, including improved academic performance.

By prioritizing the importance of emotional growth, and reducing the emphasis on testing, we help our children grow into more secure, well balanced adults, who can thrive in a diverse global society, able to navigate the multitude of opportunities and challenges that they encounter. And we also help improve their academic careers. For students' overall health, both emotionally and cognitively, it is imperative that we focus on emotional growth.

The mandates of the Common Core Learning Standards (and now the newly adopted Next Generation Learning Standards in New York), enforced by high-stakes tests, have led to dramatic changes in our classrooms, to the harm of our children. With a school’s very existence riding on the outcome of grades 3-8 standardized tests, and with teachers’ jobs dependent on these scores, schools have been forced to narrow their
curriculums to focus far too heavily on just these two subjects, neglecting science, social studies, art, music, and so much more.

It is time now to recalibrate and move forward with research-based methods of teaching that we know will improve our children’s academic lives and will not continue with the harm caused by the mandates of the current system. We must abandon one-size-fits-all lesson plans and stop drilling to create high scores on year-end standardized tests. Instead, children should be involved in play (especially younger learners), project-based learning, cooperation, collaboration, and open-ended inquiry.

Leaving the mandates of the current system also allows students to engage in “divergent thinking,” meaning “generating multiple approaches to solving a problem.” For example, “a test addressing divergent thinking may ask “what are the uses for a flower pot? An average person would have 10 to 15 answers to this question. A genius of divergent thinking would come up with a hundred possible answers, and they do this by changing the concepts of already existing thinking – can the flower pot be 10 meters wide, or can it be made of rubber, and so forth.” In contrast, most tests promote convergent thinking, where children find the one right answer to a question, like in high-stakes testing, where a child “follows a particular set of logical steps to arrive at one solution.”

As pressure has mounted on achieving high test scores, focusing on a child’s social growth has been shunted aside. But study after study shows that social learning is critical, in more ways than intuition suggests. It isn’t surprising that integrating social (and emotional) learning within a curriculum leads to improvements in positive self-image, positive connections with school, reductions in discipline issues, and reductions in substance abuse. It makes sense that a child’s overall behavior and wellness would improve when he or she can navigate social issues, from sharing, to teamwork, to collaboration, to work division, to conflict resolution, to managing within a group.

An added bonus to this healthy sense of being, though, is that academic achievement also improves -- significantly. A recent study involving almost 100,000 students concluded that children who had the benefit of curriculums with social and emotional learning opportunities placed well over ten percentage points academically above their non-trained peers.

But today’s mandates and heavy pressure on ELA and math test scores have made fostering emotional growth an afterthought, if that. 21st century skills of collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and communication aren’t learned with testing and drilling math and ELA. They are learned, truly learned, when done in the context of social learning, of emotional learning; and it is long overdue that this learning be prioritized. As
one educator noted, if our children had sufficient social and emotional learning opportunities, “we’d live in a better world with far less hate and far better social and emotional health.”

**CONCLUSION/CALL TO ACTION**

Our current system, based on flawed standards and enforced by high-stakes tests, has led to a situation that is no longer healthy or productive for our children. We must create a new philosophy of what it means to be truly educated and how we plan to achieve that. There is a loud call from education leaders, families, students, and community members to end the current system and strive for a way to educate children so that they become engaged, life-long learners.

I believe the next few years will set the stage for the next forty years in public education. To get to the root of the problem, we first must identify it. Simply put, the problem lies not with our children; it lies with our political leaders who influence and set policy and mandates for school districts. These leaders make decisions that reduce our children to numbers and scores, and by doing so, they are failing our children.

By truly focusing on the whole child – by converging the physical, emotional, academic, and social components of PEAS – we are finally acting in the best interest of all children, supporting their physical and emotional health, and at the same time, setting the stage, as research strongly supports, to maximize academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the *new normal* is to teach less and test more. And because of the high stakes attached to these tests, schools are forced to focus on academic outcomes at the expense of a child's social and emotional growth. Under the current model, teachers rank and sort children based on a proficiency model instead of how much growth each individual child may show. Our emphasis on well-being is a much needed new narrative that will inevitably swing the educational pendulum back toward a balanced state of the true purpose of education: **PEAS**.