

Strickland: Ohio Schools Need New Focus

By Associated Press

NBC 4

updated 2:16 p.m. CT, Tues., Feb. 24, 2009

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Concepts such as problem solving, critical thinking, cultural awareness and media literacy would overtake memorization and pencil-and-paper tests in an educational overhaul trumpeted by Gov. Ted Strickland.

Strickland's education aims in his two-year budget proposal would not only change how schools are funded but also how students are taught. Ohio's curriculum would be infused with so-called "21st Century Skills," a buzz phrase in the education world whose framework has been implemented in 10 states and in individual schools across the country.

The goal is to move students away from the memorization and regurgitation of facts and instead require them to apply their knowledge in problem-solving situations, often with the use of technology.

American students have been performing poorly on problem-solving skills in comparison to students from many other industrialized countries. A growing body of research in cognitive psychology suggests that minds learn best when memorization of facts is blended with critical thinking exercises to use that knowledge, noted a recent report from the think tank Education Sector.

"The concept was you had a consistent approach to what students should know and what they are able to do," said Dr. Bill Hiller, executive director of the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation in Cleveland and a 21st Century Skills supporter. "The 'know' got a lot of attention. The 'do' got little attention."

For example, a senior at a high school that has adopted the skills model may be asked to collaborate with classmates to explore how previous societies used their natural resources for food. Students might then use videoconferencing equipment to talk to government officials about the use of corn in the U.S. for biofuel as opposed to food, and its economic and environmental impacts.

They would publish their research online via wikis or podcasts.

The exercise on natural resources is part of the general subject area of "financial literacy." Other topic areas include "global awareness," "civic literacy," and "adaptability."

The 21st Century skills curriculum is an educational plan that is rooted in what employers say they are looking for in a highly competitive, globalized world: students who have knowledge, can analyze information, solve a problem, and can present a solution in a digestible way. The curriculum includes somewhat vague "soft skills" such as initiative and self-direction, and

interpersonal skills.

With its focus on practical skills that are well-suited for the business world, critics have voiced concern that the 21st Century curriculum is a fad that will get rid of the basic, broad knowledge that comes with a liberal arts education. The key is blending the new approach and the old approach together, Hiller said.

Ten states have signed on as demonstration states with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a network of 30 major businesses and education groups. Neighboring West Virginia, which began the new curriculum last August after two years of preparation, was the second state to sign on.

“We’re not asking kids just to memorize and regurgitate,” said Liza Cordeiro, spokeswoman for the West Virginia Department of Education. “We’re asking kids to think through and discuss in the classroom.”

However, since the 21st Century skills curriculum is still in its infancy in West Virginia and the other participating states, there are no concrete measurements yet of how students and teachers are responding.

West Virginia has updated its assessment test to reflect some of the new skills being taught to students.

“We don’t know how our kids are going to do come April,” Cordeiro said.

Finding new, accurate, relatively inexpensive ways to test the 21st Century skills is a challenge, noted the Education Sector report from November 2008. Grading collaborative projects or portfolios of written work are time-consuming tasks that must be performed by teachers, rather than the machines that generally grade multiple-choice assessment tests.

Grading the new tests also introduces subjectivity into a realm where uniformity and predictability are prized.

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