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## A week to ponder education

Starting school young, in small classes, is shown to work. Shouldn't we do it?

By James Sando

This week - American Education Week - prompts the question, What should education do for America?

It should produce an engaged and interested populace with solid basic skills, intellectual curiosity, and a lifetime love of learning. To be meaningful, education should prepare its students both to earn a living and to thrive.

Unfortunately, the emphasis these days is all on earning high scores on standardized tests. With the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, there has been an obsessive and irrational focus on improving education through testing - as if test scores on multiple-choice questions can actually measure the depth of learning.

This act mandates that all states set education standards and determine how they will assess student performance, with severe penalties for schools that don't make annual progress.

This approach gets it all wrong. It forces a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum and tells students that what matters most in education is not critical or creative thinking but rather fact memorization.

So how can we best provide children with opportunities to develop their intellect, skills and potential? The answers lie in reduced class size, full-day kindergarten, and early-childhood education. Each would help students perform better in school and ultimately become more successful in life.

The Tennessee Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio data in 2002 are widely considered the single most influential source of class-size research. It shows that in every grade level from kindergarten through third, students in small classes outperformed students in larger classes on achievement tests in all subject areas.

The data show that starting early, either in kindergarten or first grade, and participating continuously in small classes for three to four years leads to the greatest benefit. Then, even if these students are moved into larger classes, their performance gains persist through their middle school and high school years.

The impact on minority students is particularly strong; Participation in small classes reduces by 60 percent the gap in college-admission testing rates between African American and white students. Perhaps the best news is that pupils who attend small classes in kindergarten through third grade are more likely to graduate from high school and to take college-admission tests.

Children who attend full-day kindergarten exhibit more independent learning, classroom involvement and productivity than their half-day kindergarten peers, according to a 1997 study by the National Association of School Psychologists. Another study, published in the Early Childhood Research Quarterly in 1992, showed that full-day kindergarten translated into higher test scores and better report cards, less remedial instruction, fewer special education placements, and better behavior.

Early-childhood education is also critical. At age 5, children who have been read to and been exposed to books and other print materials have a vocabulary of 20,000 words, according to a recent report from Pennsylvania

Partnerships for Children. In contrast, children who have not had that benefit can enter school with a vocabulary of only 5,000 words. Clearly, the gap is already there. "By the end of third grade, the path to success or failure in school has been charted for most children," the report says.

Those interested in true education reform should make their opinions known in Harrisburg. In March, Gov. Rendell vetoed \$4 billion in education subsidies as a strategy to get the General Assembly to consider his reform package. Central to the plan are preschools funded by the state, full-day kindergarten, reduced class size, and increased training for teachers.

Now, eight months later, Rendell has agreed to a House bill that cuts his request for the first year of school reform from \$560 million to \$250 million, and still the General Assembly is squabbling.

Because achieving education-funding equity between poor and wealthy school districts will cost the state money, passing this legislation will require higher taxes. We call on our state legislators to make the tough choices, pass needed legislation and fund programs that have been proved to yield results.

Let's celebrate American Education Week with a renewed commitment to providing meaningful reform and education that will prepare our children for the demands of the 21st century.

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