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NATIONAL NEWS

With Blocks, Educators Go Back to Basics

New York Times

By: Kyle Spencer

November 27, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/28/nyregion/with-building-blocks-educators-going-back-to-basics.html?_r=1&ref=education

Huddled together on the reading rug of a prekindergarten classroom on the Upper West Side, three budding builders assembled a multilayered church with a Gothic arch. Nearby, another block artist created a castle with a connecting courtyard. Meanwhile, a fifth toiled earnestly on a shaky tower, eliciting oohs and aahs from across the room when it came tumbling down.

These were not prekindergartners, but members of the [Parents League of New York](#), who had crowded into an oversubscribed workshop on block building last month. The tower constructor, a lawyer named Matthew Hurd, was still wearing a suit.

Jean Schreiber, a self-described “block consultant,” advised the group to engage their children in building by photographing their work. “Don’t rush to help them with structural challenges,” she said. “You don’t have to ask them a million questions. Just sit with them and notice.”

As in fashion, old things often come back in style in education. The Parents League workshop reflects a renewed faith in unit blocks — those basic, indestructible wooden toys created in the early 1900s — sweeping through some elite swaths of New York’s education universe. While many progressive private and public schools have long sworn by blocks, more traditional institutions are now refocusing on block centers amid worries that academic pressure and technology are squeezing play out of young children’s lives.

Eva Moskowitz, the former city councilwoman who runs a fast-growing network of [charter schools](#), said her schools had created a “religion around blocks,” and she proudly advertises their fully outfitted block labs alongside the chess program and daily science classes. The International School of Brooklyn is developing a program using blocks to reinforce foreign-language acquisition. And Avenues, the [for-profit school](#) scheduled to open next year in Greenwich Village, is devoting a large section of its kindergarten floor to a block center.

“If you talk about block program with parents these days,” said Libby Hixson, director of Avenues’ lower school, “they just light up.”

National school-supply companies like Becker’s and Lakeshore added more than a dozen block-related products to their catalogs this year. And at [City and Country School](#), the West Village private school founded in 1914 by Caroline Pratt, who is credited with inventing unit blocks, there has been a marked increase in observers from local schools that do not have the progressive pedigree usually associated with block play.

Fretta Reitzes, who runs an early-education conference every November at the 92nd Street Y, said the block workshop sold out so quickly this year that she added a second one. “What we’re seeing,” she said, “is teachers really caught between these very prescriptive curriculums and their desire to give kids opportunities to explore.”

Sasha Wilson, co-director of the four-year-old Bronx Community Charter School, said his faith in blocks was solidified by a struggling second grader's actions after an apple-picking field trip. "She went to the block corner and built an incredibly complex structure, a tractor engine, and she was able to talk about how all the parts moved," Mr. Wilson recalled. He said he told his staff a few days later: "We need to be looking at this student in a very different way."

Caroline Pratt's original unit blocks were made of smooth, splinter-free maple, though cheaper sets are now available in birch, beech and rubberwood (experts say it costs about \$1,000 to outfit a classroom). Sets usually include 5.5-inch-long rectangles as well as pillars, columns, triangles, curves and longer rectangles.

Studies dating to the 1940s indicate that blocks help children absorb basic math concepts. [One published in 2001](#) tracked 37 preschoolers and found that those who had more sophisticated block play got better math grades and standardized test scores in high school. And a [2007 study by Dimitri Christakis](#), director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Hospital, found that those with block experience scored significantly better on language acquisition tests.

But perhaps the hottest pitch of late, particularly to high-stress, high-strung New York City parents, is that blocks can build the 21st-century skills essential to success in corporate America.

At the Chapin School on the Upper East Side, where educators have spent the last several years weaving a comprehensive block program into kindergarten and first-grade math and social studies, students toiled together on a grocery store and a fancy hotel one recent morning, beneath a sign that read: "When Partners Disagree They Try for a Win-Win Solution." Nearby was another sign, outlining a seven-step building guide, that looked as boardroom as it did classroom.

Ms. Reitzes, who runs the youth center at the 92nd Street Y, said many educators were embracing blocks as an antidote to fine-motor-skill deficits and difficulty with unstructured activity, problems that they blame on too much time in front of screens and overly academic preschools. Sara Wilford, director of the "Art of Teaching" graduate program at Sarah Lawrence College, sees it as an obvious backlash. "There are so many schools where children are seeing less and less play," she said. "And I think parents are getting that that is not going to help them."

But many of the newfangled block centers go beyond unstructured play. Students are encouraged to continue working on the same structure, sometimes for weeks. Teachers seize on opportunities to connect what they are building to the curriculum. And technology is often involved.

Jessica Thies, a teacher at Chapin, said her students photographed their block extravaganzas with one of the school's iPads. Last year, they made a documentary about blocks using a Flip video camera and edited it during computer class. "It is very low-tech/high-tech here," Ms. Thies said.

At the 92nd Street Y preschool, teachers videotape students doing block work so they can review their process. And at the Packer Collegiate Institute, the Brooklyn Heights private school where educators have recently recommitted themselves to blocks by hosting workshops for teachers and moving block corners to more centralized locations, students often use classroom computers to search for images or watch videos that help them visualize something to build.

Rajul Mehta, who has two daughters at Chapin, fondly recalls playing with blocks during her own childhood in Mumbai and appreciates their applications in math, science, architecture and aesthetics. "These are very basic skills that our children can take back into their daily lives," she said.

Riley Palmer, a second grader at City and Country, said that creating a series of Brooklyn Bridges, each about three feet tall, helped her class understand what it had been like for the original builders. "There is so much you can do with blocks," Riley said. "You can stagger them. You can stack them. It's fun and cool. And when we're done, we're going to be able to show everybody in school what we did."

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STATE NEWS

Michigan House committee plans to resume testimony on charter school bill; Democrats oppose

Associated Press

By: Staff

November 29, 2011

<http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/e9905a42d7324eb58b9e7a9755d3ef0d/MI--Charter-Schools-Michigan/>

LANSING, Mich. — The Republican-led House [Education](#) Committee is resuming discussions on [legislation](#) to allow more charter schools in [Michigan](#) while Democrats continue to oppose the plan.

The [education](#) committee has scheduled hearings for Tuesday and Wednesday on the [legislation](#) that would end some numerical and geographical limits on charter schools. It narrowly passed the Republican-led Senate in October.

The state has roughly 250 charter schools. Supporters say more should be allowed to boost [educational](#) options in public schools.

Democrats say it appears to be an effort to help charter schools that are sometimes run by for-profit companies at the expense of other schools.

Democratic Sen. Rebekah Warren of Ann Arbor on Tuesday plans to propose a constitutional amendment to ban for-profit schools. It's unlikely that proposal would advance in the Republican-led Legislature.

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New Jersey: Christie Administration Considering 'Model Curriculum' for Low-Performing Schools

NJ Spotlight

By: John Mooney

November 28, 2011

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/11/1127/2000/>

The Christie administration is launching an effort to create a "model curriculum" for low-performing schools -- its most aggressive step yet to dictate not only what is taught but also how and when it is taught.

As part of a new accountability system proposed to the federal government, the state's Department of Education is beginning a year-long process that will see the first specific content outlines and school-based assessments in place for language arts and math by next fall, officials said.

Most of that initial effort will reflect the national Common Core State Standards already developed in those subject areas and adopted in more than 40 states, including New Jersey. But the state will do the same for other areas such as the arts, physical education, and world languages.

State officials stressed this is not an attempt at a state curriculum, and said it would only be imposed on schools where there is not a "quality curriculum" in place. Much of the proposed accountability system focuses on the state's 200 or so lowest-performing schools in terms of test scores and graduation rates.

"If they can demonstrate a quality curriculum, we would support that," said Penny MacCormack, the state's new assistant education commissioner and chief academic officer. "In the event they don't, we'd want them to utilize this."

While the state has developed standards and frameworks over the past two decades, this remains the first time that an actual curriculum is being devised. And like most of Gov. Chris Christie's education reform proposals, this is sure to spark debate over the state's role in controlling daily instruction in the classroom.

"This is certainly a change in philosophy for the department," said Robert Morrison, chair of the New Jersey Arts Education Partnership, a statewide umbrella organization for the visual and performing arts.

"Historically, outlining how the content is taught is a line they have never crossed," he said. "I'm not saying that is bad or wrong, but it is clearly a major shift."

Morrison and others have said the state will need to be careful in making sure that different subject matters are given equal weight. Especially in the arts, it is a tricky balance and one that has sparked debates in the past in the development of the state's standards.

"This is new ground and very important ground, and it is critical that all the areas be involved," Morrison said. "Quality education in New Jersey does not start and stop with the Common Core."

MacCormack said the process has only just begun, and experts and educators in each subject area would be involved in curriculum development. She said public sessions would likely be held on each one, even broken down into different age groups.

She acknowledged completing the first phase by next fall will be a challenge. "This is a heavy lift, so groups will need to be very focused," she said.

And MacCormack agreed that there will be some philosophical issues to resolve, such as which languages to emphasize in a world language curriculum and which fine or performing arts.

"These are all decisions we will need to make," she said. "Choral music, instrumental, theoretical, all things we will need to consider."

Still, MacCormack stressed it should not be seen as a threat to local districts but an added resource.

"Educators like to see a model or an exemplar of something they need to develop themselves," she said. "This is a support for

them, an actual support."

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Louisiana: Governor Jindal sets education goals

The Advocate

By: Will Sentell

November 29, 2011

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1437491-125/jindal-sets-education-goals.html>

Gov. Bobby Jindal said Monday that improved teacher quality, more school choices and giving local educators new flexibility in how dollars are spent will be the key goals of his 2012 education agenda.

Changes in Louisiana's teacher tenure law, which provides certain job protections, and rewards for top-flight teachers are also among the possibilities, other officials who attended the meeting said afterwards.

"If I were a betting person, I would say there is some kind of legislation around tenure," said Penny Dastugue, president of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and one of the participants in the 70-minute, closed-door meeting in Jindal's office.

State Sen. John Alario, R-Westwego and Jindal's choice to be the next president of the Senate, said tenure changes are possible and should be looked at in light of public school problems.

Alario, a state lawmaker since 1972, said he has backed "every education reform" and a variety of money-raising measures aimed at improving schools.

"But all of that doesn't seem to have worked at this point," Alario said after the meeting.

"So I think it is a matter of going in and breaking it all apart and seeing what we can do to make it work," he added.

Jindal did not mention teacher tenure, and any bid to revamp it would trigger fierce opposition from teacher unions and their allies.

Others at the meeting included state Rep. Chuck Kleckley, R-Lake Charles and Jindal's choice to be the next speaker of the Louisiana House; Recovery School District Superintendent John White, who is the governor's pick to be the next state superintendent of education; and Chas Roemer, who won a second term on Louisiana's top school board earlier this month.

Jindal said Monday's gathering was one in a series of get-togethers that he plans with teacher union leaders, lawmakers, principals and others.

He said he plans to unveil his school package in January, which lawmakers will then officially review starting on March 12 when the regular legislative session begins.

Jindal listed teacher quality as the first of three "guiding principles" for improving schools.

"It is absolutely critical to do everything we can to put an excellent teacher in every classroom in Louisiana," he said.

Jindal said that includes finding ways to identify the best teachers, keeping them and recruiting others.

Dastugue said after the meeting that removing impediments that districts face in keeping the best teachers, and replacing those who are ineffective, are among ideas under review.

"You are going to see ways to attract and retain the best teachers, just like you would in any other business," she said.

On another point, Jindal said new options are needed for students and families stuck in low-performing schools.

"We must make sure that parents, especially the parents of students trapped in failing schools, have more choices, more options available to them," he said.

Jindal said charter schools, which are supposed to offer innovative alternatives to traditional public schools, and online classrooms are positive steps.

But he added, "There are other steps that we need to take as a state to make sure our children have a full array of choices and options.

"It is not enough to tell these children to wait," Jindal said.

The governor also touted major changes in how schools spend their dollars as the kind of flexibility they need to improve student performance.

He said a handful of school districts this year took part in a pilot project that gives principals the authority on how to spend most state, federal and local education dollars.

Under current rules, the state allocates school aid, which is then sent to districts on the basis of staffing levels, programs and other factors.

Jindal said his public schools agenda is driven by several concerns, including the fact that 44 percent of the state's roughly 1,300 public schools got a "D" or "F" in a recent report.

"It is not enough to make incremental progress when we have so much work to do in our education system," he said.

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Illinois: A record 10 CPS schools recommended for overhaul

Chicago Tribune

By: Joel Hood

November 29, 2011

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/education/ct-met-cps-turnarounds-1129-20111129.0.2376515.story>

The new leadership team at Chicago Public Schools is recommending a record 10 schools for "turnaround" next year, reflecting how poorly many city schools are preparing students for college and the workforce, officials said.

Each of the schools — which together represent some 5,800 students — has been on academic probation for at least five years and ranks among the system's most chronically underperforming schools.

At Marquette Elementary School on the Southwest Side, for example, half of the school's almost 1,400 students are not meeting state testing standards. At Fuller Elementary in the Bronzeville neighborhood, two-thirds of students are failing to hit that mark. Parents at Smith Elementary on the Far South Side were so upset with their school this past summer that they voted for the district to turn it into a charter school.

But in a new wrinkle this year, the district's proposed turnaround list also includes a higher-performing school, Casals Elementary on the Northwest Side, which is performing on par with other CPS schools but was targeted for turnaround because students had fallen behind their peers in neighboring schools.

In that case, district officials said they looked not just at performance on standardized tests but also trend lines and student growth over time.

"We're attacking the ones we think are the most critical to make sure we improve the lot for the kids who live in those communities," said CPS chief Jean-Claude Brizard. "We're not denying the fact that much more needs to be done."

The goal of the turnaround process is not only to boost student achievement but also to change the academic culture within the school. Whatever disruption students may feel in the short run is offset by greater stability in leadership and an improved learning environment in the years ahead, Brizard said. But officials acknowledge the change doesn't come easily.

All the top administrators, support staff and teachers are released and asked to reapply for their positions. Most will not return, although Brizard said it's likely the majority may find work at other district schools.

The changes come at a significant cost-savings to the cash-strapped district because older, experienced teachers are typically replaced by younger teachers with lower salaries. But talk of finances or how the layoffs may affect teachers is missing the point, Brizard said; the turnaround process is about the students.

"I'm much more concerned about the lives of kids that have been disrupted the last five years, 10 years in some cases," Brizard said. "When you walk these buildings as I have, when you see kids not learning, you see these kinds of environments with kids not flourishing, it's heartbreaking."

CPS is spending \$6 million next year to help the 10 schools in the transition process and an additional \$14 million dedicated to the 10 schools specifically for tutoring, after-school initiatives, professional development and other programs to improve student performance as CPS shifts to a more rigorous curriculum for next year.

The district is tackling four of these turnarounds itself through its Office of School Improvement, while the rest will fall to the nonprofit Academy for Urban School Leadership. The academy, which counts CPS' chief administrative officer and its school board president among its former executives, has undertaken 12 turnaround projects in Chicago with varying degrees of success.

Some academy schools, such as Morton School of Excellence, overhauled in 2009, have far surpassed the district average on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. The number of students who met or exceeded state benchmarks on the Prairie State Achievement Exam at the academy's Phillips and Orr high schools beat the district's performance in 2010-11, according to

CPS.

Other schools, like Sherman Elementary on the South Side, continue to flounder five years after the academy took command, said Donald Moore, executive director for the education advocacy group Designs for Change.

"CPS put several million dollars into this school as they did other turnaround schools," Moore said. "Why should we be expanding a program that basically has failed to produce results?"

The Chicago Teachers Union said Monday that it was blindsided by the turnaround announcement, which must be approved by the Board of Education in February.

"There's not even an attempt at collaboration; CPS is not interested in it," said union President Karen Lewis. "And there are a variety of ways to do this so much better than to destroy school communities. And that's what turnaround does."

The union has long advocated for getting more district and community resources to troubled schools to help teachers, instead of the full-scale changes that come with turnarounds. Lewis also raised questions about a conflict of interest considering the district's ties to the academy.

Others, too, questioned whether CPS was being fair about the turnaround schools it selected, given that Casals had more than 60 percent of students last school year meet or exceed standards on the ISAT, or that students at Chicago Vocational Career Academy have seen three principals in three years.

But some say turnarounds serve an important function, even if they're not popular.

"Nobody likes turnarounds, but I just think it's a necessary evil," said Ald. Michelle Harris, whose 8th Ward includes two schools on this year's list. "When schools have been on academic probation for a number of years, you have to do something."

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Colorado: Opinion: Literacy is the key to unlocking children's potential

Denver Post

By: Barbara Grogan, Beverly Ingle, and George Welsh

November 28, 2011

http://www.denverpost.com/opinion/ci_19413560

Literacy matters.

It matters because literacy is the foundation for all future learning. It matters because literacy is one of the strongest predictors of a student's likelihood to graduate from high school. It matters because 26.6 percent — more than 16,000 — of Colorado's third graders score below proficient on the state's reading assessment. It matters because we can change this statistic.

More than 40 community, education and business leaders have traveled across the state with Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia and Mile High United Way CEO Christine Benero to do just that — figure out how best to transform the educational reality for Colorado students.

From Steamboat and Fruita, to Montrose and Durango, and Alamosa, La Junta and Colorado Springs, we met teachers, parents, community leaders and businessmen and women who expressed their concerns and shared their ideas with our lieutenant governor. We learned about successful early learning programs that are helping prepare children for their first days in school. We learned about the importance of parental engagement and the need to reach more families with information and support to teach their children effectively. We also learned about the critical need for community collaboration to reach the children who have limited access to reading materials and quality child care and preschool.

Sitting with a roundtable of teachers or talking to a proud grandmother in Southwestern Colorado or seeing an 8-year-old in Fruita who waited eagerly to thank the lieutenant governor for reading to his friends at his school, we know early childhood literacy is the right issue. Literacy is not a new issue, but it is a critical one. Research shows that two-thirds of poor readers will struggle to graduate from high school. Research also shows that the fastest rate of growth in non-readers is among Hispanic and lower-income families.

Coloradans have a history of solving problems together. Just as they did 125 years ago when people from varied backgrounds came together in Denver to create the first United Way in the country, Coloradans are joining the movement to improve early childhood literacy.

Gov. John Hickenlooper, Lt. Gov. Garcia and Christine Benero initiated the Literacy Matters tour to listen to the voices of everyday Coloradans, and to begin the process of formulating ideas on how the state can help support and advance the work being done every day to help children read.

As business, community and education leaders, we applaud this approach to leadership — listen, learn, act — that has come to define what Coloradans expect and demand from our elected officials, and we are proud to say it is exactly the dynamic we

see coming out of the governor's office.

And we return from the tour with renewed commitment to do what it takes to ensure that all of our children learn to read and unlock their full potential. From engaging parents to read to children starting at birth, to high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten and effective teaching, we now know what it will take to help every child to read. All of the people who we met during our bus tour who are working every day with our children inspired us and taught us that together we can make literacy for every child a reality.

Literacy matters. And our children deserve nothing less.

Barbara Grogan is the founder of Western Industrial Contractors, serves on numerous boards and is co-chair of Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia's Early Literacy Council. Beverly Ingle is a middle school teacher and president of the Colorado Education Association. George Welsh is superintendent of schools for the Center Consolidated School District and president of the Colorado Association of School Executives.

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