

Building Teacher Enthusiasm for Core Knowledge

by Steve Farkas and the FDR Group

Introduction

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute commissioned the FDR Group to gather insights about how to communicate more effectively with elementary school teachers about Core Knowledge. As Core Knowledge appraises how far it has come and what needs to be done going forward, we conducted four focus groups to better understand the views and reactions of teachers toward the basic principles of this education initiative.

Our discussions with teachers began with their starting point: their vision of teaching and learning, their understanding of what a properly educated youngster knows, their approach to instruction, and their take on where their schools are today. We pushed them to wrestle with conflicting values and approaches. We probed to see which messages regarding Core Knowledge resonate, which are counterproductive, and which don't seem to matter.

We do not believe that there is some magical combination of words and phrases that can “sell” an idea when these words are not connected to the essence of the idea itself—or to the interests and priorities of those listening. Substance matters. But knowing how to present substance also matters. We hope that what we learned about how teachers think about this issue will make a difference in that presentation. As Benjamin Franklin once said, “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.”

Executive Summary

The focus group research reveals that Core Knowledge is built upon principles that hold considerable innate appeal to teachers. Several of the key elements that resonate most with them:

- Its focus on content—most teachers inherently believe that teaching knowledge is crucial and favor a curriculum that strikes a balance between content and skills.
- Its focus on delivering a broad, well-rounded education. Teachers are profoundly disappointed in what they see as the current narrowing of the curriculum. Core Knowledge offers an antidote.
- Its “scaffolding” approach to teaching. Teachers believe that students learn best by building atop what they already know and can do. And, since Core Knowledge does not dictate pedagogy, it avoids that source of resentment.

- The advent of the Common Core State Standards. With these broad standards established across much of the land, many teachers are looking for specific guidance on curriculum content that is compatible with Common Core, brings it alive, and renders it teachable.

The research also reveals some nontrivial worries among teachers regarding Core Knowledge (and other preset curricula). These include:

- Concerns about what gets on the must-learn list of knowledge and who will choose it. Teachers worry that non-educators with non-educational motives will do the choosing.
- The challenge of name recognition. Core Knowledge—the idea and the term—is virtually unknown among ordinary teachers. What’s more, the term “Core Knowledge” is itself too easily confused with the term “Common Core.”
- A generalized reform fatigue among teachers, driving them to react with suspicion to any new initiative.

Observations drawn from one focus group conducted with current Core Knowledge teachers include:

- Making the shift to become a Core Knowledge school requires outstanding leadership that fosters cooperation among staff—especially because the curriculum can be intimidating at first.
- The teachers we interviewed were eager advocates. They recommend full implementation of the Core Knowledge curriculum, say they enjoy greater autonomy, and report that students and even their families become enthusiastic learners.

The report ends with suggestions for describing Core Knowledge in ways that put its best foot forward as it communicates with teachers, along with a recap of the attitudinal strengths and challenges facing the program.

Methodology

Focus groups are an ideal methodology to gauge audience receptivity or resistance to different messages and, in this case, to get at the “why” behind the reactions of teachers to Core Knowledge. The conversations were guided by an interview protocol but were also flexible, to allow the moderators to pursue promising insights. This is a report on the key themes that consistently emerged from the focus group conversations. Focus groups cannot be used to estimate percentages or to generalize to populations with calculable estimates of error. Instead, they are useful for capturing the language, trajectory, and dynamics of people’s thinking.

Our explicit purpose was to use traditional marketing research techniques to come up with practical communications advice for Core Knowledge that could be used with teachers across

the country. To that end, one group took place in the Atlanta area and consisted of teachers working in city and suburban schools; another was in the St. Louis area and drew teachers from suburban, rural, and inner-city schools. Two groups took place in New York City: the teachers in one group were from elementary public schools across the city (Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, or Queens); the teachers in the second group were all from a Core Knowledge school in Queens. We interviewed forty-two elementary classroom teachers in all. Their demographic characteristics were varied: they worked in a variety of grade levels; they had a range of teaching experience, from newcomers to veterans; and they were diverse ethnically and racially. As one might expect, only a handful of the participants were male. Teachers were not recruited to conform to a predetermined view of any kind; no attitudinal questions were asked in the recruiting for the focus groups.

Support for Teaching Content is Widespread

In the broadest sense, making the case to teachers that knowledge is important is not difficult. Most teachers came to the focus groups with an inherent appreciation for the value of students having some points of knowledge at their fingertips—even if it occasionally involved memorization. Not one of our focus group participants was acquainted with the term “Core Knowledge” (except, of course, the teachers from Queens). But teachers were easily able to articulate the reasons they believed that students need to learn specific knowledge and fundamental content.

Knowledge and Facts Are Important

One of the first tasks we gave teachers was to respond to the statement that “kids should learn how to learn; facts and figures and dates are not that important, especially in the age of Google.” But teachers instinctively pushed back at this definition of education precisely because it downplayed learning facts. Instead, they wanted balance. Teachers believe that there are points of fact and knowledge that children need to learn and that they need to teach their pupils.

“I know with math, one of the biggest things is the number sense. Not being fluent in your facts is just a disservice to children, and I hate that we’re moving away from it. I feel it’s almost like whole language—when they said spelling was not important, they’ll figure it out. Well, they never figured it out.” Atlanta

“Yes, they can definitely look it up, and they should know how to look it up, but they should have approximate dates. They should know the years in which World War II happened, and they need to know the approximate dates of the Depression. They can’t think that it was in recent times.” New York City

“Content knowledge is important. I mean, they have to know how to add and subtract. And they have to know that certain things happened in history. And they have to know vocabulary that has to do with science.” St. Louis

“I just don’t think it’s unreasonable to teach kids, even at age five, who is your president. I think it’s important to be able to hold a conversation—even as a kid—and know things.” Atlanta

One of the four focus groups was conducted with teachers in a Core Knowledge school in Queens, New York. Responding to the same question challenging the need for facts in the age of Google, a teacher there challenged the presumption that technology is used effectively. She said, “Children use this technology for games, not for academics. The iPad: if you observe the kids, they are not calculating answers or Googling what is the capital of the state. They’re playing games.” And sometimes technology fails: “When they go to the grocery store, they need to know when the computers are down whether or not they’re getting the right change,” said a St. Louis teacher.

To be sure, several teachers were keen to emphasize skills and downplay content. Responding to a conversation about reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one teacher said:

“I don’t know about a book. Obviously, some kind of work that touches on figurative language that they have to be able to understand. But I don’t necessarily think it has to be a book. There’s theories where you can teach similes and metaphors and personification. You have to have the exposures, but to say that every fifth-grader’s going to read this book—no.” St. Louis

But it is safe to say that virtually no teacher saw skills-versus-content as an either-or choice: Most simply thought that a balanced emphasis on skills and on content should be struck.

“I think they need both. I think that’s crazy to think that they need one or the other. Anybody that might say that probably isn’t an educator.” St. Louis

“I believe teaching kids how to think—how to find and evaluate the answer. But I also believe that there are certain things that every kid should know. For instance, by the time you come to high school, you need to know that you live in the state of Georgia. But you ask some high school kids and they say Atlanta.” Atlanta

By the way, teachers overwhelmingly preferred using the word “knowledge” instead of “facts” or “content” to describe the substance of what was taught. “Facts” seemed to point to simplistic

learning, and “content” could be vague. “Knowledge” had the virtue of being clear as well as something elevated and inherently worth possessing.

Even Memorization Has Its Place

Although it was not their go-to strategy, even memorization had its place in the minds of teachers. Teachers spoke about memorization in somewhat apologetic terms, knowing that it was often frowned upon. Indeed, a Fordham/FDR Group survey of professors of education found just 36 percent saying that it is absolutely essential to “teach math facts such as memorization of the multiplication tables” in the early grades. So one might have expected it to become completely objectionable in the world of teaching and education. But to teachers, it’s a technique that sometimes makes sense.

“Memorization isn’t the ideal all the time, but there is a place for it. By the third grade, you need to memorize the multiplication table. You should limit memorization of words and the facts, but there is a place for it. And then you try to have them understand the concept.” New York City

“In our preplanning, our principal was talking about spelling words, and there’s a debate. Should you have kids memorize a spelling list? But I’m kind of old school and I think that kids should know how to spell basic words. Of course, we have word walls and personal word dictionaries. I just feel that memorization with some things is effective for kids to be successful, but it’s just, you know, back and forth.” Atlanta

Opportunities and Effective Arguments on Behalf of Core Knowledge

The formal presentation of Core Knowledge as a term and concept took place about midway through the focus groups. But most of its key principles had already been under discussion beforehand as we talked about pedagogical assumptions, how teachers define education, and how teaching had changed over time. And while the moderators came prepared to make the case for the value of Core Knowledge, many of the arguments on its behalf came spontaneously from the teachers themselves. We thus consider these messages to be especially promising in terms of effectiveness because they tap the preexisting mind-set of teachers.

Although we use the term “Core Knowledge” in writing about the findings below, many of the quotations preceded the formal presentation of the concept. And, as noted, few teachers had been previously acquainted with the term “Core Knowledge.”

Building Blocks of Knowledge

Teachers have a core belief of their own: that students learn best when they are building upon previous layers of knowledge. The notion of progression and of building blocks as keys to learning is intuitive for teachers. Whether they've absorbed the utility of the "scaffolding" of knowledge from cognitive science or from their personal experiences, it is integral to how teachers think that teaching and learning work.

"When you look at each grade, the content knowledge that is built into that grade is essential. So by the time the child gets to the next grade, it's already assumed or guessed upon that I can teach this child this because what they learned from the year before."
New York City

"I have a friend who teaches in a district in our county, and she said there's so many kids that come in to seventh grade that don't know their multiplication facts. So it's hard for her to teach the higher level math skills when they can't even do the basics. I absolutely do think that there's things that kids have to know." St. Louis

Meanwhile, teachers want to be able to assume that a level of learning has taken place by the time students first arrive in their classrooms so that they can move the kids forward. But they are often sorely disappointed.

"They should know to capitalize the word 'I,' yet I still have kids who don't capitalize their own name in third grade. I shouldn't have to tell you every day that you start a sentence with a capital letter." Atlanta

"As a third-grade teacher, I would feel comfortable knowing that my second-grade teachers were responsible for such and such and it was covered and it was taken care of. And those kids know, and assuming that I can start off on my third-grade year knowing that they know X and Y." Atlanta

An Antidote to the Narrowing of the Curriculum

Coming into the focus groups, teachers were already deeply troubled by the short shrift given to science, social studies, and the arts in their schools and classrooms. They will respond positively to Core Knowledge principles that define education expansively because it accords with how they define education. Core Knowledge can be seen as an antidote to the narrowing of the curriculum.

"I want broadening—more of a renaissance. I just think it's good to give them a taste of different things. You can still have a core curriculum—your reading, your writing, your arithmetic—but I like that kids are exposed to things and develop different interests. Otherwise, are we just going to have cookie-cutter people in America?" Atlanta

Although there is some amelioration of narrowing when they weave social studies and science into ELA, teachers are concerned that this is often an inadequate approach. When the key goal is reading, for example, teachers talked about how discussions of history have to take a backseat. And a subject such as science can require a hands-on approach impossible to get from reading.

“Now it’s down to ninety minutes of social studies a week and 105 in science—and that’s not counting when there’s counseling or testing. We’re like, oh, we won’t do social studies today. So I think it’s definitely decreased. And even though I try to integrate it, there’s only so much I can do. When you’re trying to do a whole lab and experiments and all that, you can’t necessarily integrate that. And those have just gotten shorter and shorter.”
St. Louis

“We don’t get to finish our science and social studies curriculum—at least, not in my school. Every year, we end up sweeping it under the rug because we have to cover all of the math topics. We have to make sure that we get every kid down for ELA. Because those are the subjects that are tested—and that’s where we’re evaluated, this school’s evaluated, and the kids are evaluated.” NYC

A Well-Rounded, Educated Person Is the Goal

Only a few teachers thought about knowledge in terms that were solely practical and instrumental. Those few argued that if knowledge was not crucial to your job, it was not crucial to learn it. “If you’re not using it in your career, then does it necessarily matter? I hate to put it like that. But I don’t think it does,” said a New York City teacher.

But many more teachers held the opposite view. Theirs was a heartfelt belief that there are things that an educated, well-rounded person should know—regardless of the relevance of those things to career considerations. In New York City, a teacher quickly jumped in to respond to the above statement by her colleague, saying: “We’re talking about somebody who is an educated person. I think there are certain things that they should know, whether or not it’s relevant to their job. I’m not a politician, but I know something about how our government works. Because it helps society. You want an educated populace.”

The sense that there are simply some points of knowledge that people ought to carry with them as they go through life—and that it is the schools’ responsibility to provide them—was common and intuitive.

“There’s just some basic things that to be considered educated, people should know. In order to be a successful citizen in this country there’s just certain things you should just know. And to walk away when you graduate in your senior year, it’s really a travesty when our kids don’t even have basic facts.” Atlanta

What It Means to Be American

The notion that students would need to know some things to make sense of what goes on in the nation's life—what the Supreme Court is and does, for example—was also clear. These teachers believed that knowledge of civics and citizenship ties Americans to their nation and to one another.

"We cannot be a society that doesn't know who Ben Franklin is, for gosh sakes!" St. Louis

"We should know basic things about this country. We should know the states, the capitals. We should know what the Supreme Court does because we live in this country. I believe in that core of knowledge in terms of our education of what this country does and where we've come from." New York City

"Part of the reason why so much of America is apathetic and doesn't participate in elections and things like that is because they don't have an understanding of the way things work. I do think that information can change behavior." Atlanta

"We're Americans. We should know about our country. I should know the fifty states like I know the back of my hand, and I should know who was the first president. I should know all that." New York City

Common Core Is an Opportunity

The advent of the Common Core State Standards has created a good opportunity for Core Knowledge. Most teachers in the focus groups had a positive view of the standards, but they now face the question: What should be the curriculum by which teachers assist their students to attain those standards? To the extent that Core Knowledge is seen as an answer, it will be responding to a clear need.

"I know how to teach. I know how to deliver it. Tell me what you want me to teach, and I can teach it, whatever it is. Tell me what you want. But the Common Core now is not telling me what they want. It's giving me a broad thing." Atlanta

"Being in a small district, I write my own curriculum. There's no team. You don't have anybody to bounce ideas off of. I think it's a struggle because I basically just have to pick and choose where I'm going to go." St. Louis

Teachers want to be left alone when it comes to how to teach—that's the most important thing to them and one of the virtues of Core Knowledge, in their eyes. They are open to guidance—and some are even open to total direction—on what to teach.

“Tell me what, not how.” St. Louis

Some teachers in the focus group at a Core Knowledge school believe that their curriculum fits in nicely with the Common Core State Standards.

“I think Core Knowledge does help you meet the standards. When you get the tasks, you correlate the lessons with the Core Knowledge. When you write the response to the literature, you are meeting the Common Core standards. When you write a persuasive essay from the social studies, you are meeting the Common Core standards.” Core Knowledge teacher

The teachers in the Core Knowledge school believe that their students do better on standardized tests as a result of the curriculum and its focus on content. As one teacher says, it amounts to “teaching to the test without teaching to the test.”

“The kids that are exposed to so much content, especially nonfiction material—their comprehension is going to be much stronger. So ultimately, if they’re good readers and they’re good thinkers, they’ll do better on the tests. You’re teaching to the test without teaching to the test.” Core Knowledge teacher

“It’s different if you have children who are engaged. Even test prep: if you don’t have students engaged, test prep goes out the window. Whatever you have, if you have students engaged, you can be more successful at whatever you do.” Core Knowledge teacher

Many teachers not from a Core Knowledge school saw a connection between strong content and better skills. The two go hand in hand.

“Coming from a school where the kids have trouble thinking critically, it’s because they don’t have a lot of information. The kids that can think critically usually come from homes that have had a lot of experiences—their parents listen to a lot of different kinds of music, they go to all the different attractions in St. Louis. Those kids are better readers, better in math, so I think being a well-rounded learner includes lots of content, art, music, going to the courthouse and talking about the legislative process with your family. That makes a big difference. And if they don’t get it from home, they have to get it from somewhere.” St. Louis

Resistance and Attitudinal Obstacles to Core Knowledge

What Gets On That List? Who Decides?

By far, the key concerns of teachers when it comes to Core Knowledge revolve around the “who decides” and the “what goes in” questions. Teachers are anxious about who decides what to include on the must-have knowledge list. They worry that it will be amateurs or people with self-serving agendas—either political or financial—instead of educators like themselves. They also doubt the capacity of people—of organizations, of educators, of states, and of the nation—to agree on what will be on that list. These are not trivial concerns.

“It took me a long time to realize education’s a business. The people that make the decisions truly probably are not educators. It’s all a business to them. Even the textbook adoptions that we get is a money deal.” Atlanta

“My point is not that there shouldn’t be a common curriculum. I think it’s very important that everybody’s more or less on the same page because if you go from one state to the other, you shouldn’t be lost. All I’m saying is, the crux of the whole thing is who is making it up? Who is deciding? I think the most important thing is that the people who are deciding are people who are knowledgeable about education. Who: that’s the problem.” New York City

The other question is about the content and whether it truly will—or can—fit the needs of all youngsters. Teachers know that kids come from different backgrounds, communities are different, and states are different. Will the curriculum accommodate those differences? Doubts emerge, and the conversation loops back to the start: Are there truly some things that all students need to learn?

“The farming community: those kids might need to know something else for them to get by in their future life. Would it apply here in the suburbs? There are some things that would probably fit in both categories, but I couldn’t say that every kid’s going to need to know the same thing.” St. Louis

“So let’s say there’s an African-American child, or an Asian child in a class or the little Jewish child. It’s already been decided what’s going to be taught. What’s included, and who decided what’s going to go into it? I can understand what they’re trying to accomplish, but I wonder if it’s even possible, logically.” New York City

The Term “Core Knowledge” Is Too Easily Confused with “Common Core”

As a term, “Core Knowledge” is virtually unknown among ordinary teachers, save for those already using this curriculum in Core Knowledge schools. In the focus groups, we had to introduce the term and define it before we could test reactions to it. Worse, it is routinely confused with Common Core. Even after Core Knowledge was introduced and defined by the moderators, the teachers routinely confused the two.

“Can you make them call it something different? Because that’s all we’re hearing is Common Core, so it’s hard.” Atlanta

Other key elements were unfamiliar to the teachers we interviewed. E. D. Hirsch, cultural literacy, and the reading series What Every X-Grader Should Know are unknown among regular teachers. (Again, the obvious exceptions were teachers at the Core Knowledge school in Queens.)

Reform Fatigue and Wariness of the “Research Shows” Argument

Core Knowledge faces a more global obstacle: the skepticism and resistance to reform by a teaching profession that has, in its eyes, seen far too many educational mood swings and transient reforms. The myriad of reforms that education has gone through—and is going through—may have had no substantive connection to Core Knowledge. But such reforms have left behind a legacy of knee-jerk doubts that are sure to greet any proposed change. Even when teachers take a liking to an idea, they start asking questions: Can this be practically pulled off? Will we be able to do this with all that we have on our plates?

“I’ve seen way too many of these things in twenty-five years. It’s just like, really? Give me another acronym.” Atlanta

“I think in an ideal world, that would be wonderful because the more you’re exposed to, the more something can spark your interest. In reality, I think because of all the restrictions and the rules in teaching, this bloody testing, because of all that, I don’t know if that could become a reality. If it could, I think it would be a wonderful thing.” New York City

Teachers also have virtually no faith in the “research shows” argument. In fact, they tend to respond to it as a warning that the person making the recommendation is someone with no experience in the classroom and no knowledge of how children really learn.

“The term ‘research-based’ over time has become the teachers’ nightmare. We view it as, okay, we’ve got a bunch of people who think they know what they’re doing, but they’ve never been in a classroom. They’re throwing out a bunch of jargon, and then they want us to buy into it.” St. Louis

The “Dead White Males” Argument Against Core Knowledge Is a Nonstarter

We tested the argument that Core Knowledge represents the assertion of the dominance of one culture—Eurocentric, white, and male—at the expense of other cultures. Interestingly, across the four focus groups and with more than forty teachers interviewed, only one teacher even recognized the phrase “dominant culture created by dead white males” and understood its meaning. More to the point, most participants saw nothing wrong with exposing students to the touchstones of American and European history and literature.

Although it was not rejected outright, the equity argument—that students from low socioeconomic circumstances would especially benefit from Core Knowledge—did not resonate strongly. And in contrast to the winning arguments (e.g., a well-rounded education, building blocks of knowledge, antidote to narrowing), this idea did not surface spontaneously from teachers. But in Atlanta, when the moderator directly provoked the issue by asking what the relevance and purpose of knowing Shakespeare would be for an inner-city high school student, this was the response of an African-American teacher:

“Because he should have every chance that every other child does. Because you don’t know where that child’s going. And especially if they do go on to college—I mean, they need to know that.” Atlanta

A teacher from the Core Knowledge school said:

“That child from Harlem needs to know what’s going on outside of Harlem. If we are exposing everybody to a certain standard of knowledge, then we can have a truly standardized test. And that’s what I think Core Knowledge does—it levels things out.”

What We Learned from Core Knowledge Teachers

We conducted a focus group with teachers working in a nationally recognized Core Knowledge school in Queens. Naturally, they knew a lot about the principles and practice of Core Knowledge. The idea was to see how they talk about what they do, to learn what they find valuable in it, and to gain some perspective about what it takes to make the curriculum work. What was their advice, we wondered?

Pay Attention to How the School Culture Changes

The politics of how a school is transformed is important—in this case, the leadership in the school led the charge but also brought the teachers along in a cooperative fashion. The teachers helped one another at the outset and continue to do so more than a decade after the adoption of the Core

Knowledge curriculum. This has become a selling point for the school; instead of the isolation that teachers typically complain about, these teachers tout their school's culture of cooperation.

"The principal, the administration, have to want that change. How many of them are willing to take that plunge into this new thing? How are they going to get all their teachers on board? If they haven't really convinced the staff to work together, it's not going to work. In our institution, we actually have the best communication."

"I never felt like it was shoved down our throat. It was: 'Let's try this because we think that ultimately down the road, it's going to benefit the kids.'"

"When we started Core Knowledge, it was definitely top-down, it was the leadership of the building. But it fostered cooperation among all of the teachers because in the beginning, it was like, 'Oh, my goodness, we're overwhelmed.' There was a lot of sharing going on. I think that continues to this day. We have more community across the grade levels rather than everybody going into their room, shutting the door, and teaching whatever. People were more open, willing to share ideas and lessons."

The Intimidation Factor

Be prepared for the possibility that the initial introduction of the Core Knowledge curriculum can be intimidating for teachers. The sheer volume—of books, of topics, of information—seems scary at first exposure. Many don't have the confidence that they can pull it off.

*"Initially, when I saw the book *What Every First-Grader Needs to Know*, I remember looking at this book, I said, 'Oh, my God, first grade?' Like this is a heavy, full curriculum."*

"I remember first starting and [a teacher] said to me, 'Our school's a Core Knowledge school.' So she put on the table like thirty books and I called my mother and I'm like I think I made a mistake. And I'm just thinking, 'Can I even read all this?' It was helpful that the teachers around you were willing to help and say, 'Don't worry, we'll help you out.' Otherwise, I probably would have just went in the corner."

"You look at the curriculum, and you think, 'Oh, my word, this is a lot, how am I ever going to teach it?' You have stories to teach every month, you have poetry, you have core sayings, core virtues, social studies, composers, science—there's so many different components to Core Knowledge. And when you look at it thrown in front of you, you think, 'I can never do this.'"

The Thirst for Knowledge Can Be Contagious

According to these teachers, the focus on knowledge generates lasting enthusiasm among students; they become more curious, they care about learning, and they become lifelong learners. Even parents sometimes get swept along.

“We don’t just reach the children; a lot of the parents become very involved, more educated on the topic. They come to parent-teacher conference and I’m talking to one father about simple machines, and he’s telling me he has pulleys and levers in his garage. You give them a project, and it becomes a whole-family project. And they’ll ask, ‘We went through the reference book, but can you give us more information?’ And they just take it to another level.”

“When the parent gets that book in their hands, and this always happens: You feel they’re no longer paying attention to you at the conference—because they always find something in there that carries them away. I could be saying something about their child, but they would be like ‘Oh, yeah, nice, nice...’ but I know they’re gone.”

“Kids get the books at the beginning of the year, and one kid in seventh grade came running up to me and said, ‘You didn’t hand out the seventh-grade books. I didn’t get my book.’ And I said, ‘No, there’s no seventh-grade book. It ends at sixth grade.’ And he said, ‘But I had the whole set. Why aren’t we getting it, why don’t they have a seventh-grade book?’ It is important to the kids. Even their core expos—they have a fond memory of what they did in Kindergarten and first grade.”

Teachers in the Core Knowledge School Have More Autonomy

Core Knowledge teachers report that they have more autonomy and freedom to teach. Other schools—that is, non-Core Knowledge schools—are increasingly regulating how much time that teachers can spend on each topic, and they work off a checklist to ensure compliance.

“There’s flexibility here. It’s not that you’re walking in the door I have to be doing this at that moment. And a lot of city schools are so regimented. You have to spend fifteen minutes on here, twenty minutes here, that everyone has to be on the same page.”

“When I was substituting in other schools, they had the guided reading, the independent reading, and it’s like fifteen-minute blocks and it’s very rigid. Someone comes by and makes sure that you’re doing it at this time. There’s no room for expanding or getting carried away with a topic. It’s just very rigid.”

Core Knowledge and Implementation

Several Core Knowledge teachers warned that partial implementation of Core Knowledge is an invitation to failure. Perhaps because they have experienced so much success, they believe that a school has to buy into the whole program—and they think that half-measures will lead to missed opportunities.

“It didn’t work out for a lot of schools because they felt they could pick and choose. Like the Chinese menu rather than taking all of it on at once. And again that goes to leadership. Because there was a push a couple of years ago with Core Knowledge in city schools. And we had so many people coming and visiting and they’d say, ‘Oh, we’re doing just sayings and phrases.’ Well, that’s not Core Knowledge. You know, it’s not a ‘pick and choose.’ It’s getting all of it.”

Resources mattered, according to these teachers—and having the course material on hand is crucial. There is an intense focus on reading, books, and materials, so it was absolutely helpful to have the resources.

“It’s fine to talk and do a lesson or SMARTBoard, but you need to also have something that a second-grader can understand and a fourth-grader can understand. There are some schools that don’t have the books. We have class sets. So the children can look at it and they can sift through it and having the book there to see it is a big difference.”

Some Marketing Help

These teachers loved their school and the Core Knowledge curriculum, so at the end of our discussion, we asked them for marketing help. “What would you say to someone—a parent, a teacher—to persuade them to come to your school?”

These are some of the phrases they came up with when we asked them to finish this sentence: “Come to our Core Knowledge school because...

- our children are engaged. Our children are motivated.
- your child will be a more well-rounded person.
- we create a community of learners.
- our children are having fun.

We asked the teachers to talk freely and make the best case they could for Core Knowledge. Here is one of the more eloquent quotes:

“Why not Core Knowledge content? They’re going to read anyway, why not a suggestion as to some of the literature—some of the classics, some of the books that they have a choice of reading? Is it going to hurt them? No. I think it’s going to help them. It’s going to help them to be a well-rounded person. Poetry: they’re exposed to different poets, they’re exposed to many, many different works and musicians and scientists. Why not expose them? Why limit them? And when they go out there and they open their mouth to speak, people say, wow, this kid knows a lot about whatever topic that he may have learned during the years in a Core Knowledge school. And I think, ‘Why limit them?’ ”

Concluding Thoughts

Appealing to Teachers’ Best Instincts

Continuing with the marketing research mission, we sought to distill the most promising descriptions of Core Knowledge into a brief pitch that allows it to put its best foot forward. Based on the focus group findings with teachers, we’d suggest a presentation that goes something like this:

Today’s curriculum limits children. Core Knowledge *expands* the curriculum so that children become well-rounded. It engages their imagination and teaches students the knowledge they need to succeed on standardized tests—without teaching to the test. Teachers have used Core Knowledge for over twenty years and have had great results with all kinds of kids from all kinds of backgrounds. The curriculum gets out of teachers’ way and gives them the freedom to teach in their own style. Each year builds on the knowledge that students learned the year before. And when people from all walks of life meet our boys and girls, they’ll say to themselves, “There go educated, well-rounded young adults who carry themselves with poise and respect.”

You know how some students’ eyes glaze over in class? Get ready to see real excitement and real learning. You know how education reforms come and go? Prepare to be swept away for the rest of your career.

Attractive in Principle but Still Facing Challenges

As education reforms go, Core Knowledge is built upon principles that innately appeal to teachers. At a time when many teachers rail against a narrowing of the curriculum, it offers breadth. As teachers instinctively feel that there are things that students must know to participate in the life of this nation, Core Knowledge agrees—and names those things. It complements the Common Core State Standards in that it offers a curriculum to help achieve the goals and skills

established by the initiative. Auspiciously, it doesn't dictate pedagogy or structure to teachers; how to teach is left to them. Judging by the present-day Core Knowledge teachers with whom we talked, it holds the promise of tapping student curiosity and the spirit of teachers themselves.

But Core Knowledge faces key challenges. Some of the challenges are marketing basics. It has virtually no name recognition; teachers have never heard of it. What's more, the term itself is too easily confused with Common Core—and Common Core is ubiquitous. Some of the challenges are substantive. Teachers are skeptical about who decides what knowledge will be on the must-teach list; they worry about the capacity of communities across the nation to agree on the list. Core Knowledge can also face implementation challenges. At the school level, beyond resources, its success appears to require smart leaders who foster a cooperative spirit among staff in the face of what could be an intimidating amount of work. Finally, Core Knowledge faces challenges in the macro-environment. It is competing for attention and allegiance when reform fatigue is widespread among America's teaching corps and when yet another acronym or perceived "gimmick" will be greeted with suspicion, if not dismissal.

A Final Note of Hope

Nevertheless, it's fitting to end on a note of optimism and appreciation for what is possible, considering that Core Knowledge is not an untested venture. This quote from a Core Knowledge teacher in Queens, a woman who was educated in Trinidad and immigrated to the U.S., can serve as the coda:

"What Hirsch did—and hopefully it can continue—it's phenomenal. Because I've never seen anyone come down to the level of the children, and really had a perspective on what a child in different grades needs. I've never spoken to him, but I think he must have had a vision of where he would want our children to grow. And I think it's marvelous and I wish every parent could see the function and the purpose. As a parent and as a teacher, I think it's phenomenal that a man like him would take the time to create such a marvelous curriculum that our kids, especially from this type of neighborhood, can fully weave into the fabric of our society. They would fit in, and they would feel at ease. And they would just shine."