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Narrow focus road to education failure

PETER O'CONNOR



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OPINION: Despite decades of educational reform focused on new national curriculum and assessment methods, our schools remain in desperate need of transformation.

Thousands of young people choose truancy each day rather than face the tedium and irrelevance of school.

We still fail essentially the same percentage of pupils we always have. And they are invariably of Maori or Pacific Island ethnicity or from poor families or both.

Our school curriculum is narrower and more constrained than 20 years ago; teachers are finding it harder to motivate and engage their pupils with learning that seems increasingly to centre on

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testing. A grinding never-ending focus on literacy and numeracy has pushed hard against other curriculum areas, in particular against the arts.

We are not the only educational system to buy into the emptiness of such curricular and assessment practices. The United States has long followed a policy of endless testing and a narrow and constrained curriculum.

Britain's schooling is so tied down by the twin horrors of testing and literacy strategies that primary education is recognised as being in almost terminal crisis.

New Zealand continues to sail along a similar path. We have disregarded the warning signs such as those contained in the Cambridge Primary Review's final report published in 2009. The report identified that as children progressed through their primary school years, their progress was "increasingly and needlessly compromised" by the current British National Curriculum's extreme emphasis on "standards", combined with a narrowly intensive approach to literacy and numeracy, with frequent testing.

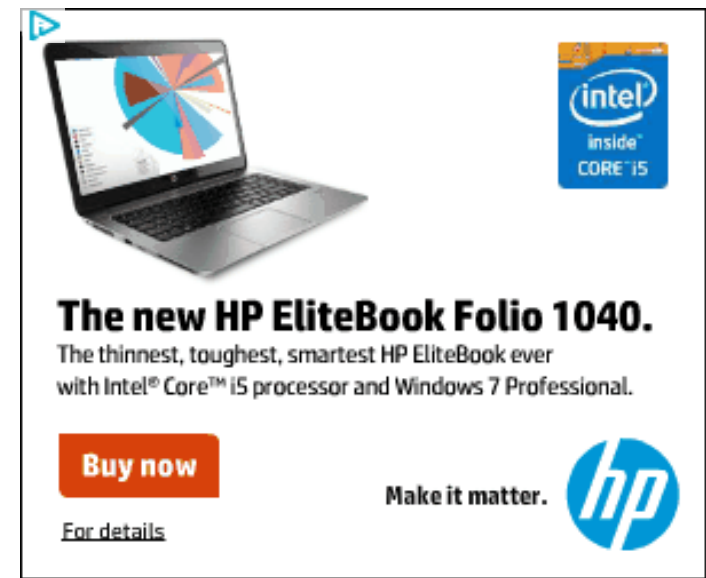
The report noted that the "most conspicuous casualties are the arts, humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas; memorisation has come to be valued over understanding and inquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its fuller sense".

The evidence is not yet in on the damage wrought in our schools by a similar approach but everything suggests that we are experiencing similar outcomes.

So the publication last month of the White House report, Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools, by the president's committee on the arts and the humanities was an invaluable reminder of the central importance of the arts in education.

The report reminds us of how powerful the arts can be for student learning. Decades of research has shown that the arts can foster innovation, improve student achievement and student engagement. Arts integration models, the practice of teaching across classroom subjects in tandem with the arts, have been yielding some particularly promising results in school reform and closing the achievement gap.


Cutting-edge studies in neuroscience have been further developing our understanding of how arts strategies support crucial brain development in learning.



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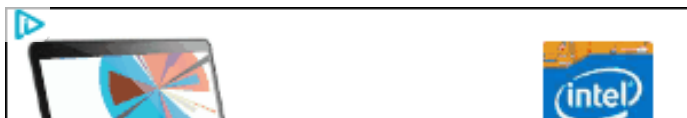
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The White House report envisions schools in cities and towns all over the US that are alive with the energy of creative thinking and fresh ideas, full of art, music and movement.

It also acknowledges that all the research points to successful schools as being places that are "arts-rich", in which pupils who may have fallen by the wayside find themselves re-engaged in learning when their enthusiasm for film, design, theatre and dance is tapped into by their teachers.

This is a vision of education far richer than our tired repetition of testing, national standards and a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy. The choice for New Zealand is stark. We can continue with what we know fails or we can embrace the possibilities of an education system that is truly transformed by the power of the arts.

The research is unequivocal about what the arts can achieve in education; whether there is the political will and bravery to adopt a new way of thinking about education, as US President Barack Obama has done, is another question.

Associate Professor Peter O'Connor is the director of the Critical Research Unit at the Faculty of Education, Auckland University. His latest work includes using the arts in schools in the eastern suburbs of Christchurch.

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