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ABSTRACT

In this transcript of "Options in Education," a weekly feature on National Public Radio, a group of experts--George Weber, Reed Whittemore, Goodman Ace, Herbert O. Reid, Albert Shanker, Harold Hodgkinson, Zachary Clements, Joseph Cronin, John Pittenger, and Richard King--interpret the back-to-basics movement. (IRT)

INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

BACK TO BASICS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is an electronic weekly magazine devoted to coverage of news, features, policy & people in the field of education. The program is available for broadcast to the 185 member stations of National Public Radio.

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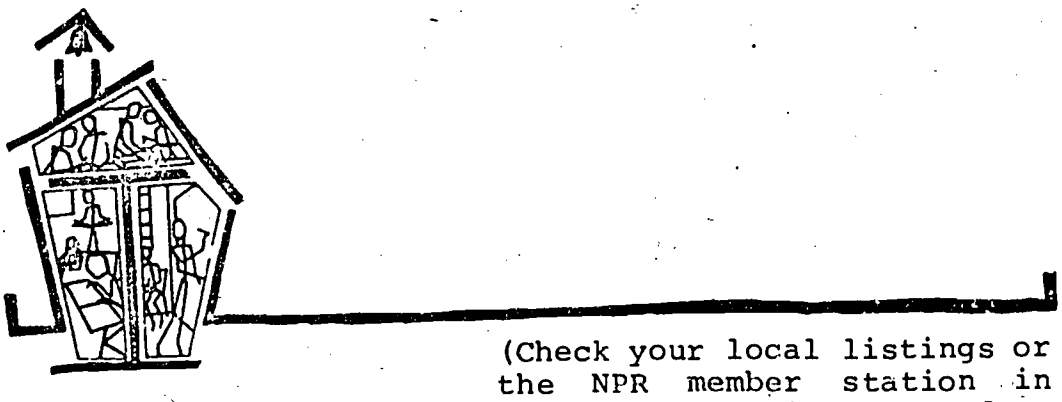

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(Opening Theme)

CRONIN: "Back to Basics" is a slogan, a very attractive slogan, even though it's quite possible that most schools never left.

TEACHER: I definitely feel that the students of today are less prepared. At times, I throw up my hands in horror when I look at Junior and Senior level laboratory reports where they're almost unintelligible.

PARENT: The graduation diploma now - it really certifies how long a young person or any other person has been sitting. It says nothing about the fellow.

REPORTER: What do you expect to learn this year?

STUDENT: Well, math, reading, and all the basics.

STUDENT: Well, I hope I'll be smarter and learn more things.

REPORTER: What kinds of things?

STUDENT: More art and more sports. But I really like sports better than I like anything else.

PARENT: I'm suspicious that my school system does not really want me to know how well or how poorly it's performing its job.

PARENT: To change the graduation requirements - to change a diploma - is not a thing which educators ought to do by themselves. I'm not sure that educators ought to be doing a lot of things anyway by themselves.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: And a lot of you folks out there are no longer willing to let educators do anything by themselves.

MERROW: Americans care about schooling for their children, and month after month of headlines about "declining test scores," "lack of discipline," and "rising costs" have sparked a revolt.

BLAIR: The battle-cry is -- "Back to Basics" -- and that's what we're going to be talking about right now.

MERROW: First, we'd better clear up just what it is we're talking about.

WEBER: If the public thought the atmosphere in the school was sufficiently disciplined and orderly and that teachers were teaching, and the students were learning, and then if they were confident that the achievement of students was either steady or rising, then I think they might be more likely to accept these rising relative costs.

MERROW: You're saying there are three things then: rising costs, the declining scores, and the rising disorder. And they combine to create what you see as a major trend in American education - a "back to basics" movement.

WEBER: Yes. And I'd add one more thing, and that is a kind of nostalgia.

BLAIR: George Weber, Associate Director of the Council for Basic Education.

GEORGE WEBER

WEBER: Well, some of the "back to basics" people feel that the schools' curriculum should be narrowed to the Three R's - plus not much else. Well, this would be too bad because the Three R's do not include, of course, science, history, geography, government, foreign languages, the arts - all these other things which we regard as part of a fundamental curriculum that all students should study. That's one danger.

Another danger is that when you go back to something, some of the "back to basics" people tie in the academic going-back to going back in other fields -- such as, notions of morality, religion in the schools, disciplinary measures (such as corporal punishment and dress codes, lining the kids up to go from one room to another like they did 40 years ago). In some areas, you have a kind of "American Legion" patriotism that's being inserted, or there's been an attempt to insert it in the public schools. There probably is a need for a kind of civic education which gives young children, particularly, the idea that their country is a pretty good place. I think we have gone much too far in many schools in concentrating on the deficiencies and warts in American history and American life - so that children and young people get the idea that maybe America is an awful place to live, and they'd be much better off if they lived in Communist China. And this, of course, is bizarre to the point of perverse because no society - that has its head screwed on right - is teaching its young people that the society is no good.

BLAIR: George Weber of the Council for Basic Education. We'll be hearing more from him later in the program.

SOUNDING OFF

PARENT: A diploma has become in many ways a sort of merit badge of good behavior - that is, for 12 years you've sat still, and you haven't done anything particularly outrageous. It doesn't really stand for any particular levels of competence.

STUDENT: Well, I was hoping maybe we'd work real work, up to the highest level we could work at.

PARENT: I think that the only knowledge that's worthwhile is what you can apply.

REPORTER: Do you find yourself going through school and not being taught how to apply some of the things that you learn?

STUDENT: Yeah, like Algebra I and II, and I don't understand anything about that. And I wouldn't know when to use it, or not to use it.

PITTINGER: I spent an hour talking to 350 students in the senior class of a high school near Harrisburg,

and you know what they complained about mostly? That nobody was teaching them to write. They said, "Less Shakespeare, and more composition." And you know something? They're right.

MERROW: Listen, folks. I can save us all some time by proving conclusively that we need to go back to basics. Then we can all go home early.

BLAIR: Okay, John. Shoot!

MERROW: All right. Test scores on the Standardized Achievement Tests have been going down since 1963 -- 41 points lower in verbal skills, 29 points down in math.

BLAIR: And, yet, John, there is evidence that things aren't that bad. Reading scores are going up. For example, one group - the 17 year olds - reads better than 17 year olds did five years ago. In fact, 87% of current 17 year olds are functionally literate.

MERROW: So, we hope that you'll stick around while we clear it all up.

BLAIR: "Functionally literate" is a phrase you hear a lot these days, and at least one poet and English professor doesn't like it a bit.

REED WHITTEMORE

WHITTEMORE: Well, if it is truly reliable functional literacy we're looking for, I suggest that we turn the whole thing over to the American Greeting Cards Company. Over the radio that company filled my ears today with this confident assertion: "Regardless of what you want to say, there is an American Greeting Card that expresses your sentiments exactly." There, it seems to me, is "functional literacy" at its best - with the company performing the function for the citizen, and the citizen recognizing that the company expresses him perfectly without his having to do a thing.

MERROW: Reed Whittemore, the poet and professor of English at the University of Maryland, told Jo Ellyn Rackleff that "functional literacy" isn't enough.

WHITTEMORE: To be functionally literate in many senses is to learn a language that most English teachers despise, and learn to live with it. The language of red tape, the language of the small print in insurance forms - in other words learn to cope with all that verbal nonsense out there that a good many English teachers are fighting.

Now, I think we all have to be functionally literate in this sense, or we won't be able to survive in a culture. So, I have mixed feelings about this. I think, though, that if you have as an aim in the schools the notion of "functional literacy" at this, I think, rather low level, you have a rather narrow view of language itself, and how it serves you. And I have a feeling that this is what is happening to us in this country. We're losing a sense of the richness of language, and how many things you can do with it other than what the American Greetings Card Company can do for us.

You have to deal with all kinds of language. You have to deal with the language of facts, the language of the newspaper, the language of those insurance forms, but you also have to deal with the

language of emotion, and the "back to basics" movement isn't taking this into account at all so far as I know.

RACKLEFF: You wrote an article recently for Harper's Magazine called, "The New Speak Generation," in which you said, "English teachers have surrendered control of language to Barbara Walters." What did you mean by that?

WHITTEMORE: (Laughter) I think I would have chosen Walter Cronkite a year earlier. We're having a big cultural shift, and this is something that is depriving the old pedagogical people of the powers to do what the "back to basics" people want them to do. I got a letter from an English teacher in Maine who said I wasn't fighting back. I ought to fight back. And, of course, I guess I am fighting back, or I wouldn't be on this program. But I do feel that the forces are bigger than me.

RACKLEFF: If it's true, and it seems to be, that high school students cannot write . . .

WHITTEMORE: Yeah. I was complaining about being held responsible for this. If you have a kind of contempt for language generally around in a culture, some teacher who teaches standard English for a little bit of a student's time in a couple of grades is not going to change that.

RACKLEFF: Do you think there's a possibility that this "back to basics" movement may lead to some kind of excess?

WHITTEMORE: You see, I regard language as central to all education. Now, if you have a "back to basics" movement which only takes up a small part of the language province, then you've got just another example of American specialization - everybody doing his own thing, and imagining that his own thing is the center of the world.

BLAIR: Poet Reed Whittemore talking with Jo Ellyn Rackleff. Whittemore says that today's college students don't write as well as their predecessors. What's more, he says, that they have less interest in writing well. All they want to do is learn to function so they can get high paying jobs.

MERROW: Whittemore puts a lot of blame for the declining interest in language on Walter Cronkite, Barbara Walters, and others who visit us via television in our living rooms every night.

BLAIR: Goodman Ace, humorist for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," recently received a letter from one of his former teachers, Roy Ivan Johnson. Mr. Johnson blames the politicians.

GOODMAN ACE

ACE: He writes, "If our leaders are leadir us into this disarray of the English language, I have a plan to stop it. It's a spin-off from what I do when I hear bad grammar on TV. I shout at my TV set, "It's not the invitation that was sent 'to my wife and I.' It's 'to my wife and me!' Where did you go to school?" Now, if every network employed a grammarian who would walk into the set while a loud bell rings - so the lights flash off and on - where the panelists are interviewing some big shot politician, and the grammarian shouts, "No, no, Senator. You just split an infinitive. It's not 'to publicly state.' It's 'to state publicly.'" And it would be "neat,"

as my little niece puts it, to have a red spot light on a politician's face to highlight his embarrassment. And then the grammarian would add, "But, Senator, you don't go away empty-headed. You win a copy of this 'Rules of Grammar.'" (Applause from the audience.) Could be a new kind of game show, you know?

MERROW: NPR Commentator Goodman Ace. Let's accept for the moment that students are not doing as well as they used to - at least in math and writing. There must be a reason..

BLAIR: Well, some people blame teachers. Others blame television. And others blame our concentration on busing and integration. NPR Reporter Marti Griffin talked about the effect of integration and busing on American education with Howard University Law Professor Herbert O. Reid.

HERBERT O. REID

REID: Unfortunately, these two things occurred at the same time, and I think people are going to conclude that the lowering of standards and the poor educational quality is due to the people introduced into the programmatic activity. That's not true because there's been a general decline across race, across class lines, and even in areas -- they picked the State of Iowa, I think, where the population has been very, very consistent, and there was no movement, so to speak, influx of any minority groups, and there they also had the decline. I'm afraid that since '54, we have been so concerned about racial mix that we have not been properly concerned about the quality of education.

Integration is an important aspect of education, but I think it is not the only thing in the educational picture. And I think we have been overconcerned about racial mixing, and, therefore, we have not been concerned about the quality of education. I think there's another reason why this slipped. And it slipped even though we've put great resources into education during this period, as a result of some of the great programs.

Educators are going to have to address themselves to the fact that over the last ten or fifteen years we've had more money and more resources. Yet, if we are measured as we measure other aspects of the community in terms of results, we have not developed a product.

BLAIR: Howard University Law Professor Herbert O. Reid.

MERROW: Reporter Marti Griffin also asked Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, for his explanation of students' academic decline.

ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: One of the major reasons for declining test scores is the fact that the curriculum has become softer - because, in the 1960's, a lot of schools and colleges capitulated to the children. We said, "If they're not interested in something, we'll teach them something else." Students are now spending fewer hours learning reading, learning English, learning mathematics . . . . There are more courses in "how to get along well with somebody." There are more courses in heritage studies - whether they be Greek, Black, Jewish or Italian.

There are all sorts of soft . . . We give courses in "How to Enjoy Movies" instead of "How to Read Shakespeare." And that has an effect. If kids are not in math class, they don't learn math. If they're taking some other type of course, they're not learning English. Of course, the grades are going to go down.

GRIFFIN: Do you see this as a result of the push toward more parental involvement, more community involvement?

SHANKER: Only partially. Part of it was parental. Part of it was student involvement. Part of it was a whole string of writers who've been writing books over 20 years saying that the schools were too rigid, and they ought to loosen up, and do many more things. Well, when you do some of these other things, which are worthwhile doing, but if you don't lengthen the school year, or lengthen the day - if you don't add them on to the other things - if you replace mathematics and English with some of these other things, then, obviously, the scores are going to go down.

MERROW: Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers.

BLAIR: So, don't blame integration and don't blame the teachers. But it might be TV's fault. Do you know who the parents blame, John?

MERROW: No. Who?

BLAIR: Themselves. When The Gallup Poll asked people to explain declining performance, parents said they were to blame for not spending more time with children.

MERROW: Well, that's only part of the list. I asked Dr. Harold Hodgkinson, Director of the National Institute of Education, for a list of some others.

DR. HAROLD HODGKINSON

HODGKINSON: Well, it's a favorite lightning rod for what everybody thinks is wrong with American society generally. "Why are the kids no good today?" It's just something that most people leap into. They love to take on a question like that.

"The kids use too many drugs, and students are in a state of hyperconsciousness when they're taking the test" is one favorite. So, the explanations range all the way from "parents don't spend enough time with kids" to "kids are using drugs too much" to even more social kinds of explanations.

MERROW: Like what?

HODGKINSON: Well, the size of the family has changed. The number of kids who come from divorced homes is up considerably. One out of every four American families moved during the last two years. We have problems of that sort that are, in the minds of some people, responsible for some of the test score declines.

Teachers, incidentally, don't come in for a major share of the blame, which I find quite interesting.

MERROW: Let's not leave out TV, and the "new math."

HODGKINSON: Okay. Those, both, also come in heavily in The Gallup Poll thing. As a matter of fact, one of the things that in my conversations with the PTA and other groups that constantly gets referred to is the number of hours that young children watch television, and the fact that a kid between the ages of 5 and 15 watches an average of 13,000 murders on television. Now, what that does to test scores I think nobody's quite clear, but it's the kind of problem that people focus on when they think about schools - and all the environmental factors that produce that. I think one way you can think about the problem is to think about the concept of ecology as it applies not to animal life, but as it applies to social life, and you can talk about social pollution. That is - What are the factors in our social environment that pollute the chances of a young person's being able to do what they're capable of doing? And, to that extent, the test score decline has been useful as a debating issue because it's gotten people to think more seriously about the causes.

I don't believe that the tests have declined as much as many people say. And, indeed, there's a lot of evidence now that suggests that for no apparent reason the tests are now beginning to stabilize, and may, in the future, move back up. And nobody did anything about it.

MERROW: (laughter) So, you don't accept any of these reasons?

HODGKINSON: Oh, no. There's never been any social phenomenon like the student revolutions like the Sixties, or you name it, that could be explained by any one, simple answer. I think it's a very complicated picture, and it may not be worth thinking much about. That is, rather than trying to find the causes - of which there may not be one - it might be better to say, "What can we do to improve this situation? How can we develop better tests? How can we get tests that will help teachers find out what students are doing wrong?" (Which most tests don't do today) And - "How can they be more useful to kids?"

There are some experiments under way now that suggest that there are much better ways of testing, that will be more useful than the ways which we now have.

I have a real worry, and that is that the "back to basics" movement, which I think has a legitimate base, may be misinterpreted into believing that what "basics" are are memorizing things, and simply going into some kind of overly obedient view of what a good student ought to be. And if the student is quiet, temperate, does what they're told, never speaks out, never learns to analize an issue, but simply memorizes, repeats, responds, and all that - I think, then, we will have lost a considerable amount of ground.

MERROW: I remember when I was a kid, the most popular explanation for the misbehavior of my generation was that kind of "nuclear awareness" - that we all might be blown to bits in any instant! And that kind of explained why we were such a bad bunch. Do you remember what it was when you were a kid?

HODGKINSON: Yeah. I was still in the "post-Depression" mentality, and I think, for us, it was largely a fact that we wouldn't be able to support our families well, and, indeed, as a Federal official, it may well come to pass. I don't really know that we had a phenomenon quite as sharp as the one you refer to. But every generation, I think, is tagged by its elders as being inferior for some specific reason, and it's part of the job of the elderly, as I was proposing, to tell the young that they're not as good as they should be - on the ground that that will make the young do better.

BLAIR: Dr. Harold Hodgkinson, Director of the National Institute of Education in Washington.

MERROW: Hodgkinson says that the standardized test score decline has bottomed out - that is, that this year's scores are about the same as last year's. He noted, also, that in the ten years before 1962, the scores went up every year, but nobody worried about that.

PITTINGER: I think the whole "back to basics" movement is asking the right questions.

REPORTER: Do you like being challenged? Do you like having to think and work a little bit harder than you think you might?

STUDENT: Yeah. I think that it might be exciting and you might learn more things than you did last year, and some people think that it won't be fun sometimes, but it should be fun.

PARENT: There are some youngsters who are graduating who are darned near functionally illiterate, and that worries me, and I hope it worries everybody else, too.

WHITTEMORE: To be functionally literate in many senses is to learn the language that most English teachers despise.

PARENT: In interviewing people for a job, often you do find that some of the very basic things are lacking in their education.

TEACHER: From what I see from some of the incoming 7th graders that we do get, many of them can't read, can't write, and can't spell.

MERROW: There's another person to be heard from who thinks he's got the problem analyzed pretty well. Dr. Zachary Clements dissects the "back to basics" movement even further for Reporter Jennifer Alt in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

DR. ZACHARY CLEMENTS

CLEMENTS: There seem to be two camps currently existing in the United States. In one camp, you've got the "touchy/feelies/warm/fuzzies." This is the type of classroom that I sometimes go to where, you know, the joint's a mess, and people try to palm it off to me as creative and . . . "Like, man, they're really into some, you know what I mean . . . they're getting it together!" But the thing that disturbs me is when I say to the people, "Gee, you know, that's really great. I like your gerbil cages, and I really think that's a neat tepee you're building in the back. But, you know, what are you doing about math skills?" "Math-what?" "Math skills." "Well, ah, man, I'll tell you truth, we don't get to that too often, but who cares, you know? These kids are into each other, you know what I mean?" Well, you see, now, that's in one camp.

Now, you go to the other side -- "I'm really glad to hear you say that, Dr. Clements, because I have said for years these kids do not have proper skills." And you've got this other person on the other end of the spectrum . . . like a classroom I was in the other day. A bunch of first-grade kids. I felt so sorry for them. They were all sitting there, and they must have sat just ram-rod still for almost two hours, little first-graders, going over "D", "G", "Ce" . . . etcetera, doing their phonics, you know. And it seemed to me that that wasn't very right either.

Now, some place in the middle is the happy medium. I'm trying to point out to people that we can have schools in which we're concerned for children, and in which there's a feeling of respect and concern, feeling of "love," if you will, a feeling of hope. And, at the same time, a school in which we're taking care of the Three R's, and we're taking care of scholastic needs.

The thing that I see as destroying many kids' self-image, destroying readers, destroying writers, destroying thinkers, destroying enthusiasm is the fact that we've got a lot of screwballs running around in education who have an idea that if you're in school for three years, you ought to have three doses, if you will, or three increments, or three cups of something. When the fact of the matter is -- When you've got kids that come to schools, as they do in America, from every walk of life, from every different type of home background environment - some of them with two parents, one parent, no parents - some of them from very wealthy settings, and no settings - some of them from tremendous experiential backgrounds to none . . . I've had kids come into my classroom, for example . . . I'll never forget the one little first-grade girl. I said to her, "What's the most interesting thing that ever happened to you?" And she answered, "The day I got lost on the Champs Elysee." And I said, "In Paris?" And she said, "Is there any other?" And I realized this wasn't her first visit to Paris. I had another kid in the classroom who'd never been more than seven or eight miles out of his radius. We've got other kids who come to school that begin to weep the first time you look at them cross-eyed. Now, we take all of these youngsters in America, and somehow, within a very few years, we expect to homogenize the entire lot. And that's the reason why you begin getting kids who lose hope, who lose their way, and begin to become turned-off, second-rate citizens.

It seems to me that one of the things that we've got to get across to teachers and to parents and to educational leaders is the idea that not all young Americans need everything in every unit. For example, you think about the United States Constitution. My question that I would throw out vis-a-vis this concept is: "What does the person in the street need to know about the United States Constitution? What do they know?" (I mean I've actually done surveys.) And I'll wager right now there isn't a person within a 50-mile radius of my voice who can tell me what the 13th Amendment is. I'll wager there aren't . . that 5% of the listeners to this broadcast who know how to amend the United States Constitution - specifically. I mean, they can all say, "Oh, well, you've got to ratify it." But I mean how an amendment starts from scratch and goes all the way through and becomes an amendment. I don't believe there's probably 5% of the population listening to this who can answer that question.

ALT: I can't.

CLEMENTS: I can't either. Which bring us down to - What does a citizen need to know? Do you know I queried about 5,000 Social Studies teachers? And when I really pressed them, in the final analysis, the thing that they agreed that a young citizen graduating from high school needed to know were basically two things: One, that the Constitution protects his rights, his individual rights - among them, the Bill of Rights especially; and, #2, that the Constitution is a constantly changing document that changes to meet society's needs, and therein lies its beauty. Would you believe that those are the major two things? Yet, what do we see being given to kids? We expect them all to know -- "Well, the conditions which led the antecedent conditions leading to the need for a Constitution . . . How do you amend the process? Which of the following was not one of the signatories? When was it first read? From what courthouse steps?"

Now, mind you, what I suggested to you initially was what I call the baser level. To me, that's where we ought to be teaching to the minimum of the kids in the room. We have to ask ourselves, "What do we want them to know?"

Take poetry, for example. What do we want the kids who sit in the back row - you know, Big Tony and Mellow Judy? What do we want them to know when the smoke clears about poetry? You know what we decided among several thousand English teachers? We want them to know one simple thing -- To like poetry! Because that's what the man in the street needs to know.

Now, on the other hand, there's two other groups. I call them the "medial" and the "open." The "medial" is that bunch of kids who are not the bottom and they're not the top. You've got that middle-of-the-road bunch of kids. And then, of course, you've got the kids like, hopefully, some of ours who are going on to college, who are going into the professions, and they have to take the "College Boards" and they need to know things on the College Boards like -- "Which of the following was not one of the major decisions of the First Pan American Conference in 1903?" They need to know things like, "The Battle of San Juan Hill involved which of the following American generals?" They need to know the minutia of information of a very trivial nature. So, that's the advanced level, the "open" level, if you will. And we need to teach those kids.

Now, I think we can effectively teach to those three groups. But, believe it or not, the more important point is the attitudes which are concommitant with this concept because this is where we're coming apart at the seems. You see, teachers are under tremendous strains because if they try to teach to too many levels, they get the feeling that somehow they're robbing the upper children, and they're catering to the lower children, or vice versa -- "Well, I'm ignoring the bottom, and teaching to the top." Now, I think if we had this concept that said, "Look, there are basically three levels," and sharply define what we're looking for at the bottom. I think we'd be in much better shape to more effectively meet the needs of kids.

And, as far as the primary goes, I just want to add this one point. Basically, I'm concerned about children's positive self-image, and then I'm concerned in the primary that they learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic.

ALT: The basics.

CLEMENTS: Yes, ma'am. But basics . . . I want to mention that in a guarded way. Basics in the sense that those are the things that a kid has to have when he leaves, but he also needs that positive self-image. You notice I name that first.

MERROW: Dr. Zachary Clements, educator and humanist, talking with Jennifer Alt of Station KHKE-KUNI, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

BLAIR: Reading, writing and arithmetic aren't the only watchwords in the "back to basics" movement. Those are the problems. The proposed solutions are things called "criterion referenced and minimum competency based testing" among other things. Each state is reacting differently. Here's more from George Weber.

MORE WITH GEORGE WEBER

WEBER: School authorities have taken a minimal approach. They have said, "Well, we're not quite ready yet. It will take a while for us to decide what we'd like all high school graduates to know for American history. So, let's take reading first, or let's just take reading and arithmetic first."

MERROW: Let me tell you a story that I think suggests that some problem may come up with this notion? Yesterday, or the day before, the paperboy came to our house, and he asked, "Have you been getting the paper?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, I'm not sure. Maybe there's a problem here." So, he brought out his book, and he showed me the book, and as he was trying to figure out where I was in the book - and it was very clear that he couldn't read that book. He couldn't read the street name - whether it was Belmont or Biltmore or Ashmeade or any one of those streets. He didn't know what those letters said. And we talked for a while, and as I realized that he didn't know . . . and I asked him what grade he was in. He's in 8th grade. Now, a minimum competency standard would be made public, let's say, for the schools in the area I live in, and that young lad might, in fact, get up to 12th grade before he even became aware of those standards. So, the question: Is it fair to set a standard for a 12th grader for a diploma, if you aren't going to set them for 11th grade, 10th grade, 9th grade and on down?

WEBER: Ninth graders, generally being taken as the time to first give the students a test. Now, some districts are already going forward not only with this procedure, but they're already saying, "Now, look. If we want students to be at a certain place at 12th grade, that really means that they ought to be at a certain place at 9th grade, which means they really ought to be at a certain place at 6th grade, or 3rd grade." So, some districts are already starting to tighten up on what is known in education as "social promotion," moving children from one grade to another because they're one year older, and for no other reason - just whatever their achievement is, low or high - and setting standards. Particularly, they're using what is coming to be known as the "checkpoint" approach. That is, they may not be setting standards for every grade, but they're saying, "Well, . . ." -- New York City's already done this -- "we'd like to have children achieve this minimum standard before they move from 6th to 7th grade; before they move from elementary school to junior highs in New York City. We'd also like to have them at a somewhat higher standard before they move from 8th grade to 9th grade, from junior high to senior high in New York City."

A number of schools, such as the Greensville County Schools in Virginia and the Beverly Hills Schools in California, have set standards for various grade levels (3rd grade, 5th grade, and so forth).

MERROW: So, a minimum standard for exit, for a diploma, is no panacea. It's got to be done pretty carefully, and you've got to think about standards for the grades along the way?

WEBER: Yes. And, of course, we wouldn't want . . . Some people fear that if you set a minimum standard, it will tend to be the maximum standard; that it will tend to depress the achievement of students who would otherwise go on to higher achievement. I, personally, don't have that fear except in those cases as we have had already in California where we have an "Early Out" exam, where an exam of minimum proficiency is then used to allow students to leave school, if they want to.

BLAIR: George Weber, Associate Director of the Council for Basic Education.

MERROW: You're listening to National Public Radio's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair. And right now, we're continuing our look at a growing trend in American education - the "Back to Basics" movement.

MERROW: It's a grass-roots movement, sparked largely by parents concerned about declining tests scores in math, reading and writing ability.

PARENT: If the public thought that the atmosphere in the school were sufficiently disciplined and orderly, and that the teachers were teaching and the students were learning, then I think they might be more likely to accept these rising relative costs.

MERROW: You're saying there are three things, then: The rising costs, the declining scores and the rising disorder, and they combine to create what you see as a major trend in American education - a "back to basics" movement.

TEACHER: The problem of many states is that they can't define what they mean in terms of the Three R's, reading, writing and arithmetic, and define those objectives - and we've got plenty of test items to plug in. One of the things I'm concerned about is What does that do to the rest of the curriculum because it's at least 1917 . . . five or eight topics, subjects of concerns that should be in the curriculum.

PITTINGER: What kids learn and how they learn is at least as much affected by things that happen outside school, how much television they watch, the prevailing values of the family and the peer group, as what happens in school.

TEACHER: I've been teaching for 12 years. And the greatest deficiency that I see is in the students' ability to communicate; to communicate both in written form and in the oral form. They tend to shift the buck in the colleges to the high schools. The high schools tend to shift it to the junior highs, and down the chain.

MERROW: "Back to basics" is showing up in State Legislatures and in State Departments of Education, where rules and laws are being

written, studied and adopted to require a proof of academic competence before graduation.

BLAIR: New York, Arizona, Oregon, Virginia, California and Vermont have already passed minimum competency regulations which go into effect in a year or two in most cases. Most of the rest of the states are feeling the pressure.

MERROW: Joseph Cronin is Chief State School Officer for Illinois.

JOSEPH CRONIN

CRONIN: "Back to basics" is a slogan, a very attractive slogan, even though it's quite possible that most schools never left the basics. In fact, you can go in the schools now in Illinois and elsewhere and find them working on basic skills for three or four hours, and neglecting the rest of the curriculum. There is some evidence that test scores in the first four grades, nationally, are going up, and yet we're reacting in a near panic fashion to declining college entrance board scores at the other end, and rearranging the furniture at the elementary level. It's quite possible we don't have to; that we just need to be patient and this trend - we've had swings before. Between 1945 and 1960, test scores kept going up. Since '60, we've had a slowing down for a lot of reasons. We're no longer trying to beat the Russians to the moon. We're good. We got there, and we developed all kinds of technology, computer systems, and the like. There is more of a satisfaction today.

College is no longer as difficult to get into as it was during the 1950's. There's a lot of reasons why many families aren't pushing their children quite as hard as they did in the 1950's.

What I'm concerned about is the defining of minimum standards may mean a very narrow band of proficiencies or competencies.

MERROW: But doesn't that make sense? I mean, let's, for example, say that we teach our children to read and write and to compute. That's a narrow band, but certainly that's something that we all ought to be able to do.

CRONIN: Oh, I think that's very necessary, but not sufficient. I'm concerned about other required programs in our schools like health and safety, where I don't think we're doing that great a job. We look at the amount of venereal disease, teenage illegitamacy, teenage alcohol and drug abuse. We've got some real problems in terms of teaching health. Conservation and environmental education so that, after we've learned to read and write, we can be able to see the books through the smog. Consumer education so that our kids can avoid being ripped off..

MERROW: Now, you're a professional educator. Do you find any danger in the idea of a state legislature deciding what the minimum standards ought to be?

CRONIN: No. I would prefer that State Boards of Education and citizen boards do a lot of leisurely thinking about what those goals and known standards are; that they consult with local citizens, PTA's and other parent groups, and consumer groups, with organized labor, with big business, with government agencies. I think there ought to be a lot of consultation.

I don't mind a state legislature, which, by the way, includes lay citizens and parents and, in many instances, a few teachers, telling us that by a certain time we must indicate what kind of a plan we have. But I would like them to leave to the boards the tasks of carrying out that plan and designing it.

BLAIR: Joseph Cronin, State Superintendent of Education in Illinois.

MERROW: Cities like Springfield, Chicago and Peoria are close to setting some kind of minimum standards for graduation. The State Legislature is not far behind.

BLAIR: Everyone seems to agree that students should learn basic skills. The problem is - How to make sure they get them. And, then, what about making sure that the better students go beyond the basics. John Pittinger is former Chief State School Officer for Pennsylvania, now considering testing for minimum academic standards.

JOHN PITTINGER

PITTINGER: I think the whole "back to basics" movement is asking the right questions. That is, the people are saying, "By golly, if we're going to spend in Pennsylvania, anyway, $1200-$1300 per child, which comes out to about $3 billion a year, then we're entitled to expect for that some results." On the other hand, there's a real danger of rushing into this thing in a simple-minded sort of way, and legislating a whole set of extra requirements and then finding out that they don't make sense.

MERROW: It's interesting to me . . . I asked you about minimum competency. You shifted back to "basics." Are those two linked in your mind, and in fact, as well?

PITTINGER: Yeah. I think that they're linked in that it's the sort of "back to basics" movement that has, in part, forced us, and, from my point of view, it's welcome, to think about what it is that kids are coming out of school with. And the thing that I have to warn people about, though, is the very easy assumption that schools can magically change all that. I happen to think that what kids learn, and how they learn, is at least as much affected by things that happen outside school - how much television they watch, the prevailing values of the family and the peer group - as by what happens in school. So, we have to watch out that we don't put unrealistic demands on the schools.

Now, I often hear, for example, the demand that schools make kids behave. Well if the parents aren't making the kids behave at home, what odds are there that somebody who has far less moral authority in the eyes of the child - than the mother and the father - can, in fact, make them behave?

MERROW: Make a prediction for us. Do you think that five years from now people are going to be regretting what they've done in Oregon and Virginia and so on?

PITTINGER: In some case, yes. In some cases, no. I don't think they'll regret what they've done in California, which is a rather different thing in allowing young people to leave school a little early if they demonstrate, as I understand it anyway, a certain level of competence. I think that's perfectly all right. In Virginia, what I understand they've done is to legislate a massive testing program and I don't frankly think that's the kind of thing that a legislature

ought to get into very deeply, and I think they may have some second thoughts about that one of these days.

MERROW: I have a suspicion that kids would be a lot happier if you told them, when they were in eighth grade or in sixth grade, just what it is they would have to be able to master in order to get out of the place.

PITTINGER: Well, I had a fascinating time about a month ago. I spent an hour talking to 350 students in the senior class of a high school near Harrisburg, and you know what they complained about mostly? That nobody was teaching them to write. I thought that was a fascinating development. They said, "Less Shakespeare, more composition." And you know something? They're right.

BLAIR: John Pittinger, former Chief State School Officer in Pennsylvania.

MERROW: Missouri may have a "BEST" Plan - It stands for Basic Essential Skills Test. Bruce Kriegsies reports from Columbia, Missouri.

BEST - BASIC ESSENTIAL SKILLS TEST

KRIEGSIES: The BEST Test will first be given in the 8th grade with separate sections on government, economics, math and language skills. If a student doesn't pass all or part of the test, the part he failed can be taken again the following year. The head of Missouri's elementary and secondary curriculum, Richard King, says the test is unlike those given in the past.

KING: The real difference in what we're doing now is we're using a "criterion reference test," which really says, "For this objective, this student can do it or cannot do it. For another student, this student can do it or he cannot do it." That's different from the past when we used standard tests which we got a mean score for the class which may have been made up of a bunch of kids on the high end who got everything right, and another on the lower end that got nothing right, but our mean score was high enough or higher than the national average, and we were satisfied with that. We're really focusing on each individual student.

KRIEGSIES: The test itself will ask questions such as, "Which of the given situations best exemplifies equality? " And, "Which statement best describes a consumer?" King describes the verbal portion of the test.

KING: We've got objectives dealing with reading labels of medicine bottles, for instance, warning signs and that sort of thing - which, if you can't do that, you can see the physical danger you'd be in. But we also have objectives dealing with the writing skills of filling out an application blank, and you've filled out application blanks, and you know they can be quite complicated; especially now that we have computers reading the application forms. And if you can't get your application filled out properly, you'll never be called in for an interview on a job because you can't read your application. And, so, those are very practical kinds of things. In the reading, "Can you write directions for somebody so they can carry out a job?" Or, "Can you read a map and find where you need to go in a city?" Or something of that sort.

KRIEGSIES: Although the immediate emphasis will be on secondary students, King says beginning students can learn the basic concepts as well.

KING: This idea of scarcity of supply and demand and so on can be taught to primary children, a kindergarten student. If you don't have enough crayon to go around, or enough colored chalk, they can understand what the . . you know, only one can use it at a time, and you have to share it. Students can understand that. When they choose to go play some activity on a playground, if you come back in and talk about, "Now, what did you have to give up to do that?" You know, "What other things could you have done with your time?" To begin what opportunity costs are. These are all economic principles. The logical time to start them, I think, is continue it right on up through, and not have a formal course in economics, but let them learn it as they come through school.

KRIEGSIES: And then on the higher level, if you talk about high school, you get ten different students with different areas they're having trouble in. How will each of them be able to be reached by the teacher?

KING: Well, you're talking about something that poses a real problem. And, hopefully, with as few objectives as we have in most schools you'll not have an isolated student who's the only one who has problems in that area. You'll be able to group them together at least for teaching about certain objectives in small groups. But it does pose a problem; putting them in a class with 35 other students in a history class when they don't know what they need to know to get in there. But it doesn't help them the way we've been doing it either. And, so, we're going to have to figure out how to deal with that. We may have to restructure, have smaller pupil-teacher ratio for these kids that need this special help.

KRIEGSIES: Doesn't that come down to money?

KING: Yes, it does. But it may be . . . you know, it's money, or giving up something else. Again, opportunity costs come in there. Maybe some of our better students, if we know all the students of this class can read and can spell, and can write, maybe you could have an English class of 40 or 45 people - those kinds of kids just as well - and then free up some more teacher time for the kids who have bigger problems.

KRIEGSIES: No decision has been made whether to require the test for graduation. Those in favor say it would give the diploma more meaning. Those against it say any test is too limited in what it shows. King says the response so far has been very good from those who will give the Basic Skills Test, and those who will have to take it. The parents appear to see the need for the test.

PARENT: I think that the only knowledge that's worthwhile is what you can apply, and I think if you can't apply these basic skills, you're at a loss. And I think this could be very helpful in helping young people to utilize what they've learned.

KRIEGSIES: Do you favor this kind of test?

PARENT: Well, yes, because where I work we're giving college credit on life experience. So, it's basically the same thing. All learning is not achieved in the classroom, but through experience. And whether they can apply what they learn through life.

KRIEGSIES: What about you, sir?

PARENT: I think it would be a good thing to have the test. I believe it would.

PARENT: I approve of some competency-based education that will assure that when we graduate somebody he has minimal coping skills for society.

KRIEGSIES: Students, too, seem to feel the test is a good idea.

STUDENT: I think it would be helpful for the kids and it would be something, you know, that would help them later on so they could do better in life, and then we'd have more successful people in the United States and everywhere, and it would help our country.

STUDENT: Okay. I think it's good because it lets the teachers know right away what the kids are having trouble with.

STUDENT: You know, if you graduate, you should be able to get through that kind of stuff instead of having to take a test for it. You know, if the State put up specific questions, flunk it? It's kind of stupid, I think. You know, really.

KRIEGSIES: You don't see a need for it, then?

STUDENT: No. I mean, when you get your diploma, they should have already went through all this stuff. Instead you have to be, you know, tested over the same thing, and if you flunk it, just study for that part. That's kind of silly.

KRIEGSIES: The State's curriculum head, Richard King, says although the programs in today's schools are better than ever, not all students have been able to take advantage of them.

KING: While we've been going so high with a few students, we've let others slip through the sieve. We've kept them there with all kinds of inducements just because we didn't want them on the street, or employment levels to be higher, and in doing that, we haven't always provided a program for every child. And I don't know whether we can ever do that completely the way schools are presently organized, but we ought to at least guarantee that they get what they need to get a job, to hold a job, and to live effectively throughout their lives.

KRIEGSIES: The BEST Test in Missouri is currently in the pilot stage. It will become mandatory in the Spring of 1979. King says that he doesn't know how long it will take before the results of the new emphasis on the basics is known. His hope is that there will be a time when every student completes high school with a knowledge of the basic skills. For National Public Radio, this is Bruce Kriegsies in Columbia, Missouri.

MERROW: There are many definitions of what basic skills are . . .

BLAIR: And there are just as many opinions about who's to blame for the lack of them.

MERROW: And there are a whole lot of suggestions as to how to test and measure them.

BLAIR: And, ironically, with student performance going down, grades on report cards are going up, and that's what's called "grade inflation."

MERROW: But despite all the hoopla, the situation really isn't all that bad, according to George Weber, the Council for Basic Education.

MORE FROM GEORGE WEBER

WEBER: In beginning reading, they're better prepared today than they were five, ten years ago. In elementary math, they're poorer prepared. In science, they're probably better prepared. In writing, they're probably poorer prepared, and so it goes. I think the big difference is the public perception of how well they're prepared.

MERROW: What's the public perception?

WEBER: Well, the public has a perception now that school achievement has gone down. As I've indicated, that may or may not be the case, depending on the subject you're talking about, and also depending on the students you're talking about. Our best prepared students in elementary and secondary schools leave secondary schools today, public high schools, as well or better prepared than they have been in the past - with the possible exception of one field, and that's writing.

MERROW: I never thought I'd be in the position of arguing this side of the case, but what I hear is that students coming out of schools today are really quite badly prepared, particularly, as you say, in writing. They can't write. They can't conceptualize. They can't think very well. They're deficient in mathematical skills. You hear this from college people all the time. The decline is real. The median, the average score, is 40 points lower today than it was ten or twelve years ago.

WEBER: The scores have declined. Whether this reflects a real decline in achievement, we're not sure.

MERROW: What accounts for what you're calling a "public misperception?"

WEBER: I think it's because in the last ten years the public has gotten a lot more information about school achievement than they ever had before. And it was only 1966 that we had released school by school achievement data in any school district in the United States. (That was New York City.) And that was forced out of the school authorities by The New York Times. Now, there's a third reason, and that is that we have had now for several years release of information that's far better than standardized norm reference - standardized test scores, the usual standardized test scores doesn't tell you how well Jimmy writes, or reads, but simply whether he's better or poorer than the national norm. But for several years now, we've had released and given nationwide publicity the so-called "criterion reference" test results from the national assessment of educational progress, and all of those results, all of that data has disappointed the public.

MERROW: Explain quickly what a "criterion reference" test is.

WEBER: If it's a history test, the experts in history and the public and school people will get together and say, "Well, here's what we think are reasonable questions to ask 13-year olds, or 17-year olds, about American history." And they'll compile such a test, and then you can see the results are in terms of that standard which is thought

to be a reasonable expectation on the part of the people who construct the test.

MERROW: So, you're measuring Jimmy against a certain criterion and not against a norm of the whole population?

WEBER: That's right. Because you can study the norm reference test results until you're blue in the face, and you won't learn from the results themselves whether Jimmy is a poor reader, a good reader, or somewhere-in-between. All you'll find out is that Jimmy is better or poorer than the national average. Jimmy's school is better or poorer than the national average. Jimmy's school district is better or poorer than the national average, or better or poorer than the state average, or whatever. Most of the public are shocked at the results, for example, on American history given to a sample of college freshmen nationwide - where half the college freshmen could not name Woodrow Wilson as President during World War I. You see, there's quite a difference between saying that school performance is either bad or unacceptable or unreasonably low in terms of some criterion and saying, for certainty that it's poorer than it was ten years ago, or twenty years ago.

MERROW: What you're implying is that for years the public kind of took it on faith that the schools were doing a good job, and the schools did nothing to disabuse the public of the notion. In fact, they didn't release the test scores if they had them. Only in the last ten years have scores been dragged out of the schools, and now when we look at those scores, we say, "Holy mackeral. That's how poorly the schools are doing?" But prior to that it had been a "good faith" kind of thing. So, now we're in an era when the public is losing faith in its schools?

WEBER: I think that's true.

BLAIR: George Weber, Assistant Director of the Council for Basic Education.

MORE WITH DR. ZACHARY CLEMENTS

CLEMENTS: There seem to be two camps currently existing in the United States. In one camp, you've got the "touchy/feelies/warm/fuzzies" and this is the type of classroom that I sometimes go to where, you know, the joint's a mess. The thing that disturbs me is when I say to the people, "Well, gee, you know, that's really great. I like your gerbil cages, and I really think that's a neat tepee you're building in the back, but, you know, what are you doing about math skills?" "Math what?" "Math skills." "Man, to tell you the truth, we don't get to that too often, but, you know, who cares, you know? These kids are into each other. You know what I mean?" You see, now, that's in one camp.

Now, you go to the other side: "I'm really glad to hear you say that, Dr. Clements, because I have said for years, 'These kids do not have proper skills.'" Like a classroom I was in the other day, a bunch of first grade kids. I was so sorry for them. They were all sitting there, and they must have sat just ramrod still for almost two hours going over "G", "Ce", "De" etcetera . . . doing their phonics, you know? And it seemed to me that that wasn't really right, either. Now, some place in the middle is the happy medium. I'm trying to point out to people that we can have schools

in which we are concerned for children, in which there is a feeling of respect and concern, a feeling of "love," if you will, a feeling of hope. And, at the same time, a school in which we're taking care of the Three R's - we're taking care of scholastic needs.

BLAIR: Reports for this program came from Jennifer Alt, Station KHKE/KUNI, Cedar Falls, Iowa; Bruce Kriegsies, KBIA, Columbia, Missouri; Mary Recchia, KQED, San Francisco; John Powell, WHA, Madison, Wisconsin; Goodman Ace, humorist for NPR's "All Things Considered"; and Marti Griffin in Washington, D. C.

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BLAIR: Our address again - National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. The transcript costs 25¢. The cassette costs $4.00.

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BLAIR: This program is produced by Jo Ellyn Rackleff. The Executive Producer is John Merrow. Technical assistance by John Widoff. I'm Wendy Blair.

MERROW: And this is NPR - National Public Radio.