

Participant Feedback from the Tenth McKee Learning Lunch

Core Knowledge

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This learning experience was co-sponsored by the UTC Center for Reflective Citizenship and the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

This McKee Learning Lunch addressed *Core Knowledge*, a curriculum that E. D. Hirsch proposed about 30 years ago. For a number of reasons, the ongoing discussion of this curricular base often has been fraught with debate as to the value of its approach. The debate continues, but the number of schools adopting the Core Knowledge curriculum is steadily increasing. A number of schools in the Chattanooga area, including several from other cities in Tennessee and in Georgia, have adopted the Core Knowledge curriculum. The discussion at this Learning Lunch included professionals from across the educational spectrum.

In accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, there were three general feedback opportunities, or Assignments 1, 2, and 3. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, have provided their insights and questions about the topic. Those responses and insights are presented below.

This report also includes something new—a response from the presenter, Dr. Lucien Ellington. Dr. Ellington generously addressed some of the questions raised at the end of the discussion, and we appreciate this contribution to the discussion.

Note: Because both the Core Knowledge Foundation and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development use uppercase letters to designate *Core Knowledge*, in this report, we do the same.

Assignment 1

Pre-discussion Question: Prior to the presentation and discussion, what question(s) do you have about this topic? The responses follow.

Use of Core Knowledge

- Why is Core Knowledge not used nationally, or at least throughout Hamilton County?
- Is Core Knowledge only a K–12 topic?
- How does Core Knowledge address special-needs students?
- At Core Knowledge schools, how do the schools deal with students who do not acquire the Core Knowledge for that grade level by the end of that year?

Core Knowledge and Common Core

- How does Core Knowledge align with Common Core?
- How many, if any, Core Knowledge team-members are also contributors to or collaborators with Common Core team-members?
- How do you assure teachers that, through Core Knowledge, core standards will be met?
- How is Core Knowledge assessed? Are there online assessments?

Core Knowledge Supports

- Do teachers get specific training when teaching Core Knowledge?
- How would a school go about acquiring professional development?
- What supplemental materials are available for schools at the middle-school level (grades 6 to 8)?

Core Knowledge Curriculum

- Is Core Knowledge a comprehensive curriculum itself? [Does it need to be supplemented?]
- With the current emphasis on accountability and testing, what role does Core Knowledge have?
- What recommendations are there for replacing discontinued history and geography books?
- How is knowledge of non-Western cultures integrated into Core Knowledge?
- How much input from minorities and woman is used in determining the specific knowledge included in curriculum?
- What plans are there to evaluate the effectiveness of Core Knowledge?

Assignment 2

Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants, in groups of four, discussed three assigned questions. Questions and responses are listed below.

Question 1. Based upon what you know or have learned today, what major assertions do proponents of Core Knowledge have about the elementary- and middle-school curricula and their relationship to reading?

- Core knowledge provides background knowledge within all the domains.
 - Context is essential for reading comprehension.
 - Integrate content to increase depth in students.
 - Background knowledge, in addition to reading-skills, is important for increasing comprehension.
 - Provide multicultural and traditional content.

Question 2. Do you believe that every student should acquire certain basic content knowledge in the major academic subjects (including music and art)? Why or why not?

- Yes. Including related arts broadens the curriculum, educates the whole child, and enables children to express themselves in different ways.
- Yes. The environment in which a child is reared will influence his or her problem-solving skills [and help him or her] to become a contributing member of society.
- Yes. Content should build on itself in order to develop a foundation and deepen understanding. Frames are context for the application of knowledge via critical thinking.
- Yes. It builds the connections upon which to assess more knowledge and broaden perspectives. There has to be a balance of content.
- Absolutely. It provides holistic brain-development, increases retention and comprehension, and develops multiple intelligences.

Question 3. A guiding assumption of the 120 people who created the Core Knowledge curriculum in the 1990s was that an overemphasis on learning-skills had crowded out a coherent content-filled curriculum in elementary schools and middle schools. Do you agree or disagree with this assumption? Why or why not?

- Yes. And the overemphasis continues decades later. The skills need to be taught, but they should be coupled with exposure to content-rich curriculum.
- Yes. But it is impossible to separate the two.
- Yes. There has to be a balance, but who gets to decide on what content is taught?
- Yes. [That's the reason] why Core Knowledge serves as a balance that bridges the achievement gap. It [gives] all students, especially those lacking resources, a standard knowledge that ensures that all of them have the opportunity to be productive citizens.

Additional Thoughts

- Cross-curricular instruction broadens the child (for example, on a golf course, collaboration between a physical-education teacher and a science teacher).
- A misunderstanding that Core Knowledge is all rote memory exists. It is not.
- Core Knowledge provides knowledge that allows for intelligent conversations to take place.
- One wonders if the absence of skills being sought by employers is caused by a lack of Core Knowledge.
- Core Knowledge allows children to discuss more-interesting topics at a younger age.
- Core Knowledge is consistent and builds with each year. Students should not learn in a departmentalized fashion.
- We are victims of political plans. Currently, there is a push for college- and career-readiness.
- Is there really coherent knowledge? Do students really understand that knowledge is integrated and that [different] subjects relate [to each other]?
- An underestimation of student abilities exists, which results in a need for higher expectations.

Assignment 3

Post-discussion Question: After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to two additional questions. The questions and responses are listed below.

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?

Beliefs About and Benefits of Core Knowledge

- What Core Knowledge is and how it can be useful.
- Misconceptions about Core Knowledge exist.
- Big ideas about Core Knowledge and curriculum in general exist.
- Core Knowledge includes a strong multicultural component.
- The immense benefits of using the Core Knowledge curriculum.
- We can narrow the achievement gap with Core Knowledge.
- The richness of content-based Core Knowledge in helping kids and teachers create a wonderful learning experience.
- Core Knowledge provides a deeper level of learning, which is crucial to life-long success.

Need for Holistic Education

- Both Core Knowledge and skill-development are important.
- The value of Core Knowledge is appropriate across all groups—public, private, and homeschool.
- We must educate the whole child in all content areas as they relate to real-world experiences.

Collaboration

- There is a wonderful educational community that we can collaborate with.
- All educators want the same thing: tremendous unity in what we hope to teach children.
- The importance of collaborating with other professionals.
- Affirmation from knowing that we are growing passionate about using Core Knowledge in our schools.

Further Explorations

- Questions still exist about who should decide what should be taught to our students.
- Core Knowledge resources have been expanded in the past decade, but there are still no online benchmark assessments.

Question 2. What unanswered question(s) are you leaving with?

Awareness

- How can we help parents and the public understand the importance of the Core Knowledge curriculum?
- How are decision-makers being exposed to this?
- How can we teach our teachers about this? Is there professional development available?
- Why aren't more schools and programs incorporating the concept of Core Knowledge into their teaching-and-learning models?
- How to implement Core Knowledge in the public-school arena?

Interest

- Is there local interest in adopting Core Knowledge? How is that interest determined?
- What are the chances that Core Knowledge could become the basic curriculum for the Hamilton County Department of Education?
- Who opposes Core Knowledge, and why?

Core Knowledge Curriculum Development/Assessment

- What other suggestions does the Core Knowledge foundation have for teaching math?
- Is Core Knowledge aligned with Common Core?
- How do those who develop Core Knowledge account for the contributions of African Americans and women, whose genius has not always been documented in history.
- Who decides the Core Knowledge content ten years from now?
- How is knowledge being assessed at Core Knowledge schools? How are the results used?

Further Action

- Core Knowledge has been around for a while. How can we move forward with including current content?
- Where do we go from here?

Additional Comments About Core Knowledge

Lucien Ellington, Ph.D.

Why don't we adopt Core Knowledge?

One issue that was raised in different ways can be summarized as this: Why don't more school districts nationally (or alternatively, the Hamilton County Department of Education) use the Core Knowledge curriculum? These three primary reasons come to mind:

1. Federalism. The Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution decentralizes education in the United States. The Federal Government, through court cases, Congressional legislation, executive orders, and departmental regulations, has a substantial role in K–12 education. The states, however, have much more power over education individually than does the Federal Government collectively. Each state (and to a lesser extent, local school districts), formulates state standards, licenses teachers, determines graduation requirements, and has substantial policy-making power regarding a number of other public-education issues.

Despite such state-by-state authority, there is compelling evidence that federalism exerts a strong influence over issues such as the adoption of the Core Knowledge curriculum— influence that ranges from the percentage of state and local funding for K–12 education compared to the Federal contribution of approximately 10% of the total K–12 bill. Although 1,260 schools in 47 states and the District of Columbia uses the Core Knowledge curriculum, the decentralized nature of education in the U.S. precludes a top-down approach to the adoption of Core Knowledge.

2. The nine-decade shift in what constitutes curriculum. The majority of public-education leaders define important curriculum in the early grades as it relates to the past. Progressive education began to become influential in the U.S. in the second decade of the 20th century. In a decentralized system, as ours is, it may take decades for high-magnitude changes to occur. By about the early 1950s, though, particularly at the elementary-school level, most K–12 public-education leaders (defined as the majority of education professors, K–12 administrators, and individuals work in state departments of education and the U.S. Department of Education) believed that skill-acquisition was more important than learning specified common academic content. Many public-school leaders began to characterize requiring young children to learn a specified, sequenced, content-rich curriculum as “learning mere facts” and to equate the teaching of academic content with rote memorization and drudgery.

3. A lack of knowledge about the basic principles of cognitive science on the part of most education graduates. Public-school leaders often have earned graduate degrees in education, an education that convinces them that students should be taught to develop good critical thinking and problem-solving skills, to become competent in such gateway skills as literacy and mathematics, and to become lifelong learners. Most people would agree that these proficiencies are critical. Education majors at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, however, learn that providing a common, sequenced curriculum for all children in science, mathematics, language arts, geography art, and music in the early grades is archaic and that various combinations of content can be used only as means to achieve student proficiency in the supposedly generic skills mentioned earlier.

An effective teacher can make learning and understanding academic content a life-changing experience for students. Such a teacher also knows that it is impossible to separate learning skills from content. Yet most education graduates, including doctoral-degree holders (with some exceptions, such as educational psychologists) are unfamiliar with cognitive science.

Cognitive science is the study of thought, learning, and mental organization; cognitive scientists typically have degrees in medicine, psychology, and neurology. (The PowerPoint presentation dealing with Core Knowledge is available on the McKee Learning Lunch website. I also have provided a reference list at the end of this discussion.)

The notion that specified, common, basic content is the gateway to learning more in any subject is the essence of Core Knowledge. Cognitive scientists have made two important findings education: (a) that every subject has its own particular set of basic content, whether it is baseball, Spanish, or geography; and (b) that a learner who has not internalized the most essential content from a particular subject in his or her long term memory is unable to learn more-advanced content about that subject.

Nationally, states such as Massachusetts and Delaware, numbers 1 and 9, respectively, in overall performance in 2016 recently have (a) realized success in improving education for all students *and* (b) narrowed the knowledge gap among students. Those states have rigorous content-rich curricula.

What about State standards?

Another question that arose was this: How do Core Knowledge Standards align with state standards?" States set their own standards, and each Core Knowledge public school must make certain that students are prepared for state tests. The 130 individuals who developed the Core Knowledge curriculum took into consideration that meeting standards was the responsibilities of educators at the state and local levels. The Core Knowledge Foundation formally designates a specific school as a Core Knowledge school if 50% of the instructional time is spent using the Core Knowledge curriculum. The foundation offers training for local schools in a given state on curriculum alignment. This process provides the flexibility that is required because of the 10th Amendment.

Does basic content knowledge in the major academic subjects exist?

The Core Knowledge curriculum, when taught with fidelity, not only gives children in the early grades the content-knowledge and skills that they need to be successful. But if Core Knowledge or some other specified, sequenced, content-rich curriculum is not taught, many U.S. students will fail to develop the necessary reading comprehension skills to gain successful employment and to take part in meaningful civic participation. Although reading skills such as decoding can be taught effectively, the dominant belief of most individuals in the public K–12 educational establishment is that reading comprehension is a *general skill* that also can be taught. The empirical research of scientists trained to study human language assert that this is an erroneous claim, because *reading comprehension is not a general skill*. Because every academic subject has its particular basic knowledge, students must learn a wide range of subjects in order to acquire the vocabulary necessary for understanding the most basic information about a given subject. If they do not learn that vocabulary, they are unlikely to become proficient readers.

Note: To gain a deeper understanding of points raised in these responses, read E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children From Failed Educational Theories* (2016, Harvard University Press).

Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

Jen Ancel. Assistant Principal, Chattanooga Charter School of Excellence.

Nancy Asplund. Graduate Assistant, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Christina Bellino. Graduate Assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Jared Bigham. Coordinator, Chattanooga 2.0.

Bengt Carlson. Experiential Learning Coordinator, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Julie Courson. Curriculum Coach, Chattanooga Charter School of Excellence.

John Delaney. Vice Chancellor, Student Management, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Charlotte Ellington. Field Placement Office, School of Education, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Lucien Ellington. UC Foundation Professor & Director of the Asia Program, School of Education, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Pegi Flynt. Professor, Southern Adventist University.

Linda Frost. Dean, Honors College, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Marcia Griffin. Executive Director, Chattanooga Charter School of Excellence.

Nancy Gurganus. Principal, Ringold Primary School, Catoosa County Schools.

Ron Hughes. Principal, Apison Elementary School.

Ashley Jackson. Graduate Assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Logan Jones. Graduate Assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Kay Kowan. Professor, School of Education, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Rene Krehl. Principal, Chattanooga Charter School of Excellence.

Ron Lowe. Founder and Director, Every Valley Leadership Academy.

M.A. McCoy. Professor, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Tammy Overstreet. Associate Professor, Academic Technology, Southern Adventist University.

Kendi Rainwater. Reporter, *ChattanoogaTimes Free Press*.

Ashley Reeder. Graduate Assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Justin Robertson. Assistant Superintendent, Hamilton County School District.

Meredith Ruffner. Head of School, St. Peter's Episcopal School.

Valerie Rutledge. Dean of the College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Randy Schlosser. Curriculum Coordinator, St. Peter's Episcopal School.

Woody Seagren. Graduate Assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Perry Storey. Director, Challenger STEM Learning Center, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

James A. Tucker. McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Priscilla Tucker. Research analyst, Learning Directions.

Jeannette Tulis. Home-school Parent.

Bryce Ulman. Rector, Anglican Church of the Redeemer.

Edna Varner. Senior Advisor, Leading and Learning Public Education Foundation, Transforming Public Education.