

## IN PERSPECTIVE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN NELSON

In a hallway at New Holland Core Knowledge Academy, students walk by a chart that maps out what each class is studying in each subject at the K-5 public school in Gainesville, Ga.



Core Knowledge prizes content across the disciplines, bucking a trend toward a narrower, skills-based approach to learning.

# Learning Essentials

BY KATHLEEN KENNEDY MANZO

**T**he word “Mesopotamia” runs like a roller coaster over the tongues of 1st graders in Jamie Hemphill’s class as they practice it over and over, interspersed with giggles. Pupils here at New Holland Core Knowledge Academy are similarly amused when asked to name the mighty rivers that fed the an-

cient kingdom’s rich valley and inspired commerce and innovation. “Tigris and Euphrates, Euphrates ... Euphrates,” they call out enthusiastically.

But the lesson on early civilizations goes beyond the recitation of strange, lyrical vocabulary words. These 1st graders can explain how the Mesopotamians were among the first people to develop a code of laws and a writing

system. They can find the rivers on a map of the region, in what is now Iraq. Ms. Hemphill has also covered a hefty dose of American history, a foundation for later grades when students will compare the development of a legal system in the Middle East thousands of years ago with the establishment of a democratic government in the United States.

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— Rob Herrin  
Teacher

Like teachers in many urban school districts with large numbers of disadvantaged children, the faculty here strives to build the foundational skills necessary for later academic success. At New Holland, however, content is king.

While many schools have narrowed the curriculum since Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, doubling up on reading and math instruction to prepare students for crucial tests in those subjects, this school has embraced a far broader course of study. Each day, its students tackle a rich and rigorous sequence of lessons in history, science, and the arts, as well as mathematics and reading/language arts.

“Instead of having students write the perennial paper about what they did on Christmas vacation, they will write about Benjamin Franklin or westward expansion or ancient China,” said Principal Jill Goforth. “This [curriculum] does expose our children to a lot of information, not just skills.”

That information is based on the work of E.D. Hirsch Jr., a professor

emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, who argued in his 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* that a common body of knowledge is essential for students to become productive and engaged citizens. He included lists of thousands of facts, phrases, events, and figures in history, literature, and the arts, which translated into a dictionary of cultural literacy, and books on what students should know at each grade level.

The Core Knowledge curriculum was rolled out the next year, outlining K-8 content in math and language arts, science, world history, American history, geography, art, and music. The proposal sparked a national conversation about essential knowledge, but proved controversial for suggesting a canon dominated by the accomplishments of white Europeans and the Judeo-Christian tradition at a time when multicultural education was gaining attention.

Some critics condemned Mr. Hirsch’s lists of facts as promoting rote memorization and a shallow understanding of the content. For some proponents of progressive education, the Core Knowledge approach undermines higher-order skills and child-centered learning.

The curriculum “steal[s] time from more meaningful objectives, such as learning how to think critically,” Alfie Kohn, an education writer and opponent of test-based accountability, wrote in an opinion piece in *USA Today* last December. “The best classrooms aren’t organized around a ‘bunch o’ facts’ but around problems, projects, and questions.”

**B**ut Mr. Hirsch has countered such complaints. The lists include information about prominent minority figures in history and diverse works in literature and the arts. The Charlottesville, Va.-based Core Knowledge Foundation, which oversees the school program, has published a thick, illustrated volume of poetry, essays, artwork, and fiction by African-Americans, titled *Grace Abounding*.

And while Mr. Hirsch believes there is a body of information that is necessary for a complete education, he does not en-

dorse treating it as a laundry list of facts and figures.

“One of the criticisms is that Core Knowledge is just a bunch of memorizing of facts. But if you go to a Core Knowledge school, is that what’s happening? No,” he said. “The claim that they’re drilling these kids in a mindless way is demonstrably false.”

In recent years, Mr. Hirsch has continued to publish and speak about the need to build students’ background knowledge and broader understanding of the world, and he has been an ardent critic of a back-to-basics approach to reading instruction that emphasizes process over content.

The main resistance Mr. Hirsch has faced, he said, is to defining an explicit, coherent body of content that should be taught. The approach, he argues, gets results.

“There’s been demonstrated improvement in reading in Core Knowledge schools in just the way the theory would predict: After one year, it’s not measurable; after two, it’s striking; after three or four, it’s tremendous,” he said. “There are no magical overnight solutions to reading comprehension, because reading comprehension depends on knowledge and vocabulary. It’s an organic and cumulative process—that’s why you need an organic and cumulative curriculum.”

**E**ducators at the New Holland academy, as well as teachers and administrators at hundreds of other schools around the country that subscribe to the program, agree. Nearly 800 elementary and middle schools use the curriculum to varying degrees. New Holland is one of about four dozen schools that have earned the full endorsement from the foundation for closely following the program. Nearly 300 schools have adopted the prekindergarten curriculum, and New Holland is helping to pilot a beginning-reading program that Mr. Hirsch devised to build skills and knowledge.

Principal Goforth and other educators at New Holland say the curriculum is a key reason why the school has made adequate yearly progress—a central NCLB hurdle—each year, with some 85 percent

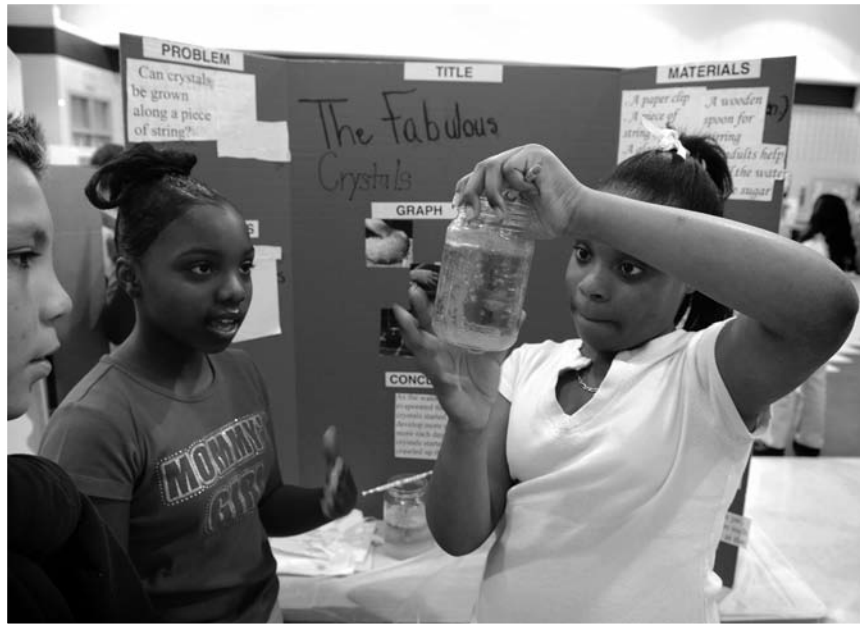
of students meeting benchmarks on state tests in math and reading. No small feat, they say, for this K-5 public school of 640 students—two-thirds of them Hispanic, and 24 percent African-American. Nine in 10 of the students are considered poor, and 27 percent are English-language learners.

Several reports over the past few years suggest that New Holland—and Core Knowledge schools in nearby Atlanta, as well as New York City and other urban districts—are bucking a trend toward a narrower, skills-based approach to building students' proficiency in reading and math. The latest, a survey by the Washington-based Center on Education Policy released in February, found that most of the nation's elementary schools increased reading and math instruction by at least 75 minutes a week in the five years after the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, and that most skimmed that time from other core subjects. Many experts say the imbalance is especially visible in urban schools and those with large proportions of struggling learners.

"The way to ace a reading test is by being exposed to a coherent, sequenced, broad, rigorous curriculum," said Linda Bevilacqua, the president of the Core Knowledge Foundation. "But schools are telling us they no longer have a social studies or science period every day, ... and many aren't doing the arts anymore, because all of the focus is being directed towards language arts."

**M**s. Goforth says that at New Holland, the goal is to give students more of everything.

"If your parents can take you to Washington, D.C., to see the monuments, or to the Grand Canyon, or museums, wonderful, but most of our students don't have the kinds of opportunities" that children from better-off families do, said Ms. Goforth, who helped



**Fifth graders Tamia Rucker, left, and Symone Brawner work on their crystals project for a science fair held in the New Holland cafeteria. Core Knowledge schools embrace a broad course of study to ensure that children are exposed to many topics.**

choose the Core Knowledge curriculum when the school opened five years ago. "This is a good curriculum for all children, but it's really helped to level the playing field for children who don't have the kinds of experiences that some others do."

Teacher Rob Herrin, a former church pastor who has taught 3rd grade here for four years, said Core Knowledge covers well the topics required by Georgia's state academic standards, then adds more information that enhances daily lessons. Moreover, he said, "this gives us the content they need to think critically and go beyond the state standards."

Earlier this year, his students became consumed by the history, architecture, literature, and other facets of ancient Greece. The lessons led naturally into a discussion of democracy in ancient times and how it influenced the three branches that define American government. A week after state tests were com-

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— Beverly Robinson  
Literacy Coach

pleted last month, and with less than a month left until summer vacation, Mr. Herrin's students were creating elaborate, color-coded diagrams of the human circulatory system as a precursor to a writing assignment. The teacher was preparing lessons for the following week that would introduce Greek and Roman myths designed to reinforce writing conventions and understanding of literary techniques.

"Core Knowledge enriches the required content," Mr. Herrin said. "It's all about expectations. If you expect them to learn rigorous content, I don't see why they can't learn it."

Teachers have also found that students are more engaged in lessons about Egyptian pharaohs and pyramids, adventures of the early explorers, the lives of George Washington and other founders, and how light and sound travel, all while building their vocabulary, reading proficiency, and math skills.

"It makes the learning more interesting when you connect the content across subjects and build on their knowledge," said Beverly Robinson, a literacy coach. "We have children with challenges and struggles in reading and math, but we work on the skills within the context of the content."

That content is on display throughout the school in classroom discussions, library selections, and hallway art displays. First graders learning about money, for example, also become steeped in the presidents who adorn the bills and coins. In computer lab, 2nd graders play skill-building games while learning about photosynthesis and pollination. The cacophony of voices and instru-

ments that wafts regularly from the music room reveals renditions of historical songs corresponding with the period students are studying in history class. Wall displays show off the geometric patterns created by 5th graders for an art project on symmetry, and reproductions of famous paintings by 19th-century American artists.

**A**t the end of a history lesson in Michelle Masters' 4th grade class, students are writing fictional stories of people who traveled the Underground Railroad to freedom, and those who helped or hindered the effort. They are awestruck by details of the physical struggles of slaves—particularly the distances they traveled by foot with owners in pursuit, and the hunger and illness that slowed their escape.

"They slept under the hay in a barn and had to forage for food in the forest," said Glenys Demorizi, who used those details to shape her story about a slave named Alondra.

Aline Aguilar told of dangers faced by Charlie and his family, characters in her story, titled "A Compass to Freedom." The tale describes a slave boy who escaped from a farmer in a hail of gunfire before he perished from starvation.

The 9-year-old credits Ms. Masters' elaborate history and science lessons for her good grades and interest in school. She becomes animated when she describes lessons on the weather and the faces of the moon, as well as history topics she's encountered, including taxation in the 13 colonies, the Intolerable Acts, the Revolutionary War, and the Declaration of Independence.

"I learn about a lot of things in social studies and science and reading that are really interesting to me," Aline said. "There are a lot of connections from what I learned this year and other years that help me understand all the information more." ■

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