

METRO

EXTRA CREDIT

PBS documentary is upbeat viewing

No more excuses: It's time to teach the children.

That's the central message of one of the most hopeful, upbeat television shows I've seen in a long time.

As youngsters return to school this week, public education advocates who want to see more learning in elementary schools really should watch a superb PBS TV show, "Early Learning."

Can youngsters, even those from troubled families, learn much more?

Yes, say researchers like Dr. Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburgh. "Our children are capable of far more than we ask or expect of them."

The program shows classrooms where it's happening.

"Early Learning" is one of the quarterly reports produced for PBS by award-winning journalist John Merrow. This show focuses on four research-based, successful approaches to improving achievement of elementary students.

The first, "Accelerated Learning," was developed by Stanford professor Hank Levin. In visiting schools, Levin was struck by the difference in classes for gifted students and those for students who were not doing well. The bright students worked on active, interesting projects. The other students often used much less engaging worksheets or textbooks.



JOE NATHAN
COLUMNIST

KTCA will broadcast "Early Learning" on Sunday, Sept. 8, at 3 p.m., and on Sept. 16 at 11 p.m.

Levin felt "there was so much talent wasted," among both educators and students. He developed "Accelerated Learning" to identify and build on each student's strengths and interests. Nine hundred elementary schools around the nation use his program with very encouraging results.

The second program described, "Core Knowledge," also has a strong record of increasing test scores. Developed by Dr. E.D. Hirsch, the idea is to identify and help all youngsters learn the same enriched curriculum, based on what everyone ought to know. Hirsch believes schools often make serious mistakes in focusing too much on developing skills, and not enough on the content. For example, some youngsters learn about Egypt and electricity. Others don't.

With the help of educators and scholars, Hirsch developed a list of "Core Knowledge." Many of the 200 schools using this curriculum produce major gains in test scores and morale.

The Merrow report also describes two other elementary programs that I've mentioned in earlier columns. It illustrates the work of Yale psychologist James Comer and Johns Hopkins professor Robert Slavin. The show takes us into classrooms, explaining how each of these approaches works, interviewing teachers, students and principals.

With support from Toyota, the Annenberg Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, Pew, Ford and Annie E. Casey Foundations, Merrow and his staff have produced a free viewer's guide, giving additional information about these four approaches. For a copy, call (212) 941-8060.

If you believe in public education, if you believe that teachers and parents can make a difference, you'll find this an encouraging, even inspiring show.

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