

# Fort Collins, Colorado WASHINGTON CORE KNOWLEDGE SCHOOL

*Some parents are trying to sign up their unborn children.*

BY DAVID RUENZEL

WHEN YOU talk with parents at the Washington Core Knowledge School in Fort Collins, Colo., about the typical public school curriculum, the discussion is often filled with images of erosion. Many describe how the curriculum they knew as children, the one rooted in the granite truths of Western civilization, has disappeared from most schools, or as they like to put it, "washed away."

Listening to them, it's as if whole strata of history, science, and literature have been eroded into a pile of unidentifiable fragments by a series of destructive shifts in the educational climate. Once students as young as twelve could intelligently discuss the causes of the Civil War; now some aren't sure which century it was in. Once students mused over the meanings of Aesop's fables and Greek myths; now there is a heap of basals and pop-culture novels. Once students understood how time formed rivers and mountains; now there are peppy speeches about saving the rain forests.

That is why, in the spring of 1992, a group of these Fort Collins parents decided to petition the local school district for a different kind of public elementary school. The school they envisioned would emphasize character education and parental involvement. But most of all, it would emphasize a content-rich curriculum that would leave nothing to chance. The curriculum would be teacher-directed from beginning to end. Students would acquire specific knowledge and skill at specific times in their schooling, the idea being that they would build on this knowledge and skill from one year to the next in an orderly and productive fashion. There would be, as the parents like to say, "no gaps" in

*David Ruenzel is senior writer for Teacher Magazine and contributing editor for Education Week. This article is reprinted with permission from Teacher Magazine (August 1996), where it appeared under the title "By the Book."*

their children's education.

When the Washington Core Knowledge School finally opened in the fall of 1993 after sometimes tense but ultimately successful negotiations with the local school board, it was with an all-encompassing curriculum developed and published by the Core Knowledge Foundation of Charlottesville, Va. The school is one of approximately 350 in forty states now using the curriculum, formally known as the Core Knowledge Sequence.

Like the college town from which it draws its students, Washington is predominantly white and middle-class. But a number of the Core Knowledge schools are succeeding with a much more diverse student population in tough urban settings like the Bronx and inner-city Baltimore. In fact, the foundation, which is headed by scholar and author E.D. Hirsch, has long claimed that the sequence is most valuable for poor and minority children—those with the widest gaps in their knowledge base.

THE SEQUENCE has its roots in Hirsch's now famous (and to some, infamous) 1987 best seller, *Cultural Literacy*. It features a bedazzling list of items children are expected to learn. The language arts segment of the first grade curriculum alone contains some forty five poems and stories, from Langston Hughes' "Hope" and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Swing" to Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* and A.A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner*. And this is just the beginning. Other people, words, events, and terms the first graders learn about include Tutankhamen, Maya, mosque and Mecca, minutemen and redcoats, Monet and Mona Lisa, Bach and Prokofiev, the Yucatán Peninsula, and the Louisiana Purchase. The sciences are thoroughly studied as well, starting with the food chain, constellations, and rocks and minerals in the first grade and advancing to natural selection, double

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