

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: March 31, 2015

Published in Print: April 1, 2015, as **The Ticking Clock of American Education**

We're Racing Through K-12 Education

By **Rebecca Givens Rolland**

It was only a bit after 6 in the morning, and I was already on the public bus to work. As a speech-language pathologist working at a high school, I had the same schedule as the students'. Often, while observing students or working with their teachers, I followed them around from class to class. The routine was exhausting—over the course of the day, I often saw students only gradually waking up.

On a typical day, I met with students to support their reading and language development. One of them, Mark, kept his head on the desk, looking like he needed a shot of caffeine. I knew he was a creative, talkative 8th grader who loved to draw pictures and write poems. "How are you doing?" I asked him, feeling as though I already knew the answer. "Tired," he said. "I've got test prep all day, then homework and soccer practice after. Probably won't go to bed before 4." We tried to problem-solve his schedule, to talk to the teachers about reducing his homework or planning for how to finish his work in study hall. He just sighed, saying it all had to get done.

Later that year, I went into his classroom and saw Mark sitting silently at the back of the room. "He doesn't seem to care," the teacher told me. "It's like all the energy's been taken out of him." When I asked what they were doing, she told me it was testing season, and their focus on novels and character traits had been replaced by discussions of which bubble to fill. Mark's notebook, once filled with pages of interwoven stories and drawings, was blank.

There is a problem at the heart of American education: a problem of time. We are trying to solve an impossible equation, and though we keep manipulating the pieces, a more fundamental issue is at play: Schooling and children's development are misaligned. Parents and teachers often consider that "more is more"—that, in the language of the national **Race to the Top** initiatives, we need to speed children along as fast as possible.

This push, while well-intentioned, is counterproductive. Children need time to sit with a subject, to see mistakes not as humiliations, but as chances to learn. Teaching should celebrate rather



than suffocate error, seeing those errors as a key part of the learning process and of children's development. In our society based on rapid-fire communication and instant satisfaction, this is often difficult to achieve.

Take the example of a unit on immigration: Students who take time for learning can explore not only how immigration happened historically, but also how it involves their own communities. They can consider current debates on immigration and involve themselves, considering not only their own and others' viewpoints, but also the narratives and vocabulary they will need. Through understanding students' work in each of those areas, teachers can evaluate where students are stronger and what support they need next.



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As a speech-language pathologist who recently completed a doctorate in education, I have seen this need for speed in action, from both a clinical and a research side. This need confounds our best intentions, the need to start early and move as fast as possible, to get finished fast. It does not allow for in-depth exploration of topics, or even more critically, for a mind-set that supports and encourages children to make mistakes. Such a mind-set, along with an interest in engaging with a topic in order to understand it fully, is known in education circles as a "mastery" approach. In contrast, a focus on performing well, especially in comparison to peers, is known as a "performance" approach. While the performance approach is not always detrimental to student learning, it is the mastery approach that I found, in my own review of 49 research studies (*Review of Educational Research*, 2012) to be more supportive of students' academic growth, motivation, and engagement.

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Although the two aren't mutually exclusive, a "mastery orientation" was positively connected to students' academic growth, as well as their motivation. A performance orientation, for the most part, was not. "Performance avoidance," or wanting not to look bad in front of peers, was especially strongly tied to negative outcomes. Also, students' developmental levels matter—6th grade, a time when many students are entering middle school, is a time when teachers' support for mastery is especially important. No surprise, considering students at that age often look for cues about how to fit in.

If we want students to learn and love learning, we must allow them to take time for it. We must not assume that rushing children to finish assignments is the answer. Both teachers and parents would do better to ask how to move deeper into a topic, to see it from another angle, rather than move through it fast. We also must encourage students to reflect on their own mistakes, and the patterns in them, rather than seek to erase them and move on. Only through this shifted emphasis can we support students in becoming lifelong

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learners, helping them move toward a truer, deeper engagement with learning and themselves.

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