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**Q&A: E.D. Hirsch**  
**Author, founder of Core Knowledge**  
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 "What is Ready?" cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

E.D. Hirsch, an educator and academic literary critic, founded the Core Knowledge Foundation in 1986. He is the author of numerous books, including *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know*.

**Editor:** What is "ready"? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

**Hirsch:** Because of the changeable character of work and of technology these days, there are few "specific" skills that will prepare young people for the economic sphere, or for citizenship. Instead, as my colleagues and I at Core Knowledge have long proposed, young people need, besides mathematics, general skills of language comprehension and communication. But we have also argued that language comprehension and communication, while generalized, is *not* a set of formal skills, empty of specific content. On the contrary, because of the nature of language, generalized verbal skill requires a wide range of specific knowledge and vocabulary. So you have the paradox that general verbal skill requires a definite range of specific knowledge. Until our schools recognize this paradox, and institute a coherent, cumulative knowledge-based curriculum, our students will remain deficient in general verbal skills and the achievement gap will remain wide between demographic groups.

**Editor:** How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

**Hirsch:** So long as eighth- and 12th-grade verbal scores remain as low as they currently are, the answer must be: "Not well."

**Editor:** Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

**Hirsch:** As we know from schools that do manage to impart high verbal skills in that time, this is certainly enough time. The problem is to increase the effectiveness and productivity of school time. Time, because of the diversity of preparation of the students in a classroom, is now being used very unproductively. The productive use of school time through the institution of a coherent multi-year curriculum will accomplish the job in the normal school day and year.

**Editor:** What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching "readiness" skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

**Hirsch:** Teachers cannot be "readied" if no one can be sure what they will teach. Teacher readiness is not a problem where there is a definite grade-by-grade core curriculum known in advance which teachers and the teachers of teachers can prepare for.