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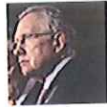
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Who Says Home-Ec Isn't a Core Subject?

In Japan, they teach meal planning alongside math, with impressive results.

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By CHRISTINE GROSS-LOH

In his first week of Japanese public middle-school, my 12-year-old son Benjamin came home with a small bag full of unexpected school supplies from his teacher: several needles and many lengths of colorful thread. The seventh-graders would be using these kits to embroider dishtowels at school.

Every student in Japanese schools studies home economics from fifth grade through high school. In addition to embroidery, all Japanese school children learn woodworking, meal planning, cooking and even grocery shopping. They make wooden pencil holders, bookshelves, lamps and stools. They mend clothes, fasten buttons and sew wallets and aprons.

In America, it is a rare school that could carve out the time for a weekly class to teach middle-schoolers to budget, cook an omelet or make lamps. Alarmed by our consistently mediocre showing on domestic and international assessments and with schools buckling under test pressure and tight budgets, our national approach to education has been to pare away "nonessential" learning so we can concentrate on "core" subjects.

Despite this laser-like focus on improving math and reading scores, however, American students continue to flounder when held up to global comparisons. What are other nations doing right that we are not?

International examples suggest that highly trained, well-paid teachers, rigorous curriculum, and family or cultural support for learning matter, and they do. But our American family's experience in the Japanese school system has shown us that we would also benefit from broadening the conversation about education to include less obvious factors. The Japanese—along with other countries such as Finland and South Korea where children are excelling in math, science and language arts—understand that in addition to teaching children math, reading and science, they also need to teach home economics and other practical life skills.

In the U.S., Family and Consumer Sciences (the latest name for what most of us call home economics) is either mandated for a brief few weeks once during a child's entire education, or is an elective at schools lucky enough to have a FACS teacher on board. Cooking and nutrition units—arguably the most essential (and fun) part of home economics—have practically disappeared.

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But classes like home economics, woodworking, art or music are about more than learning to play a recorder, plan a menu or thread a needle. They foster concrete know-how, as well as the confidence to improvise. They teach children to make good choices, take the initiative and make connections. When a student measures the dimensions of a bookcase, he is learning math and geometry in a hands-on, applicable way. When Benjamin embroidered his dishtowel he was tapping into an engrossing creative process.

Japanese educators have long emphasized both academic and nonacademic subjects, and the results are impressive: Japan has the lowest rates of child obesity in the industrialized world (tied with South Korea). Despite fewer holidays and more homework, Japanese children report being happier in school than their counterparts in other developed nations. And—perhaps most importantly in the minds of American educators—Japanese students consistently outperform U.S. students on international achievement tests, especially in math and science.

Some American educators are starting to catch on. The University of Chicago Laboratory School, widely regarded as one of the top schools in the nation, includes compulsory home economics in its seventh- and eighth-grade curriculum, and its website states that self-sufficiency in this area will foster the "competency to make educated and intelligent choices, and to apply principles and generalizations to new situations."

Compulsory woodworking has been making a comeback in a handful of public and independent schools around the nation. Among other benefits, woodworking motivates children who are drawn to hands-on learning, and encourages a deeper engagement with traditional subjects such as geometry. Every American child deserves a similarly comprehensive education.

After five years of living in Japan, we moved back to America in 2010 but return to Tokyo each summer where our children attend their former schools. The Japanese education system is far from perfect, and America's unmatched diversity is why my husband and I prefer our children to grow up here.

But there is a lesson to be learned from a nation like Japan that so unabashedly believes a variety of classes is one key to success. Like Japan, we needn't fear that time allocated to home economics will get in the way of a sound education. We need to embrace the idea that it is essential to one.

Ms. Gross-Loh is the author of "Parenting Without Borders: Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us" (Avery, 2013).

A version of this article appeared October 1, 2013, on page A13 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Who Says Home-Ec Isn't a Core Subject?.

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