**Experts Wary Of SpringBoard**

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Published: March 15, 2009

TAMPA—[Hillsborough County school](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/hillsborough-county-school/) officials’ plan to build [critical thinking skills](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/critical-thinking-skills/) in students through fun, engaging activities may not be as simple as it sounds, some experts say.

“More is more when it comes to reading real literature,” said Carol Jago, president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English.

“My 10th-grade students read 20 books a year—10 in class and 10 more engaging books on their own,” said Jago, a [California high school](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/california-high-school/) English teacher for 32 years and co-director of the California Reading and [Literature Project](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/literature-project/) at the University of California at Los Angeles.

“When you create the curriculum to pander to what students are interested in—pop culture—you stop doing what schools were intended to do,” Jago said.

This year, Hillsborough schools switched to [new math](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/new-math/) and [language arts curriculum](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/language-arts-curriculum/) for most middle and high school students that focuses on specific hands-on lessons. Most dramatic is the shift away from yearlong studies of British, American and world literature in high schools.

Replacing them are themes with fewer novels, short readings, film clips and popular music. Contemporary literature has replaced many classics.

Shift A Cause For Concern

SpringBoard, sold by the College Board, is intended to prepare more students for Advanced Placement classes in high school. The AP classes also are a product of the College Board, a [nonprofit membership association](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/nonprofit-membership-association/) best known for its SAT and PSAT exams.

A recent report about the changes sparked responses from teachers and parents about the shift from a classic [English curriculum](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/english-curriculum/) to new materials with more hands-on learning that stresses critical thinking skills.

Some English teachers are worried that students taking [language arts classes](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/language-arts-classes/) won’t be prepared for college.

So are some parents.

“My daughter’s required reading is at a fourth-grade level,” said [Joyce Brown](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/joyce-brown/) of the eighth-grader’s honors [language arts class](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/language-arts-class/) at Liberty Middle School. “My daughter’s an avid reader, and I’ve noticed a drop in her vocabulary skills. Parents just are clueless.”

But district officials say students don’t realize they are learning because the lessons—designed to improve critical thinking—only seem easy.

There is more than one approach to teaching critical thinking skills, but all require challenging content, said Joyce VanTassle-Baska, professor and executive director for the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

Hands-on learning is stressed more today, she said. But, she said, “High-level learners don’t need a lot of hands-on activities in order to learn a concept. It’s catering to students who are less able.”

Classical literature endures for a reason, VanTassle-Baska said. “The reason they are called classic is because they have meaning across cultures and across time. Students exposed to the entire text are going to be exposed to the language, the complexities of language, the beauty of language.”

Richard Paul, director of research at the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University in California and chairman of the National Council for Excellence in Critical thinking, said that in 28 years his international foundation has worked worldwide in 18 languages.

“It’s not what you think about—it’s how you think,” Paul said. “Even the worst thinkers among us do some critical thinking. ... It’s a matter of degree.”

Deep, Analytical Thinking

Paul estimates that less than 1 percent of the population engages in deep, critical, analytical thinking because “they don’t have role models to do this.”

The way to get students thinking critically, he said, is “make sure teachers have learned it themselves.”

Learning to think critically involves defining a purpose, questioning, gathering information, interpreting, reflecting, evaluating and correcting.

“This is really an old problem,” Paul said. “Educators started talking about critical thinking, calling for this in the late ‘30s ... . It’s a long-term process. We find again and again teachers and educators are looking for the quick fix.”

The skills Paul refers to are similar to those Hillsborough school officials say they are aiming for. Whether SpringBoard is the vehicle that will improve students’ [critical thinking skills](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/critical-thinking-skills/) is yet to be seen.

“The reason the [critical thinking skills](http://www2.tbo.com/topic/k/critical-thinking-skills/) never gained traction is the lack of content,” Jago said. “What is it you want students to be most critical about? The place where that lives is challenging, rigorous text. It’s not in the movies. Our students are pretty good at critical thinking when it comes to the movies.

“Would students rather watch a movie or read ‘Beowulf’?” she asks. “Literature class isn’t easy—it’s hard.”