

PERSPECTIVE

Nutritional education, not olestra

COMMENTARY

By JERRY CAMARATA

It seemed like, well, a miracle. Imagine it: all the fun, but none of the fat. All the taste of high calories, but none of the consequences. Scientists called it olestra, and the people cheered.

Then we found out that calorie-free taste came with just one price: the very miraculous chemical that made the fun possible also robbed the body of nutrients. We would pay for the frills of taste by having the substance of our food taken from us.

In short, there is no such thing as a free lunch, at least a calorie-free nutritious lunch. If you want to lose weight, you can't do it with a magic chemical, or with the powders and potions late-night infomercials peddle, or a simple, 30-second-a-day painless exercise. Healthy living requires a healthy lifestyle, and a consistent pattern of behavior which transcends time and has been a part of basic eating requirements.

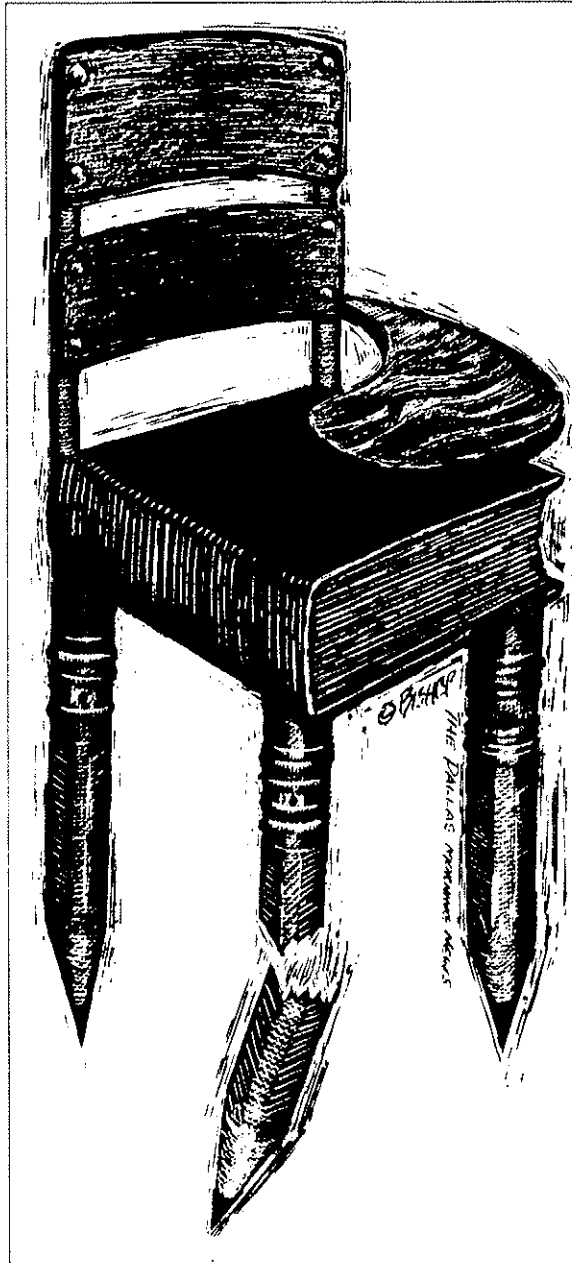
Taking a lesson from the olestra craze and paying close attention to the vision of educational outcomes expressed by our new chancellor of the New York City Board of Education Dr. Rudy Crew, a compelling argument exists to translate simple nutritional facts into educational practices which would be worthy of our youngest pupils.

The school system of the City of New York may be about to undergo epoch-making transformations. This was made perfectly clear by the chancellor when he said he would be embarking on actions the likes we have not seen since General Sherman moved through Georgia. Our state Legislature is even getting into the act by seriously looking at school governance. All this because parents have demanded a redefinition of education itself.

We deceive ourselves, however, if we believe that the creation of a new school program, or the reworking of an old one, will magically burn away the fat that has accreted to our educational establishment, the fat that creates lethargy in schools and leaves the minds of our young people flabby and weak.

The body requires a healthy, solid diet of pure, nutritious food, one that supplies all those vitamins and minerals, all the protein we have learned we need. Scientists tell us, though, that one can be quite overweight and yet malnourished. Fancy food is nice but it is useless, even harmful, if we are missing the basics.

Our children need to be able to



obtain, absorb, analyze, and critique information, and also perceive the beauty and power of language. They need to be able to read. Our young people must be able to communicate, to objectify their thoughts on the page, to set forth clear, logical arguments in a compelling way. They need to be able to write.

Our students must be able to deal with abstract and concrete examples of relationship, of quan-

tity, of pattern, and to perceive the beauty and rhythm of these as well. They must understand arithmetic.

They need to value the human faculties that enable them to perform the activities symbolized by the three "Rs" by being given the chance to grow up in a culture where education is valued, celebrated and enjoyed.

To achieve this for our students, we need not re-invent the wheel in

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every generation. Our teachers, the professionals actually on the line in our classrooms, know what needs to be done, and how best to feed these young minds. We must give them the freedom to be the best that they can be, and to unleash their own creativity and energy.

Finally, we have to realize that one of the keys to success is success itself. Looking for a healthy diet? Go to healthy people and watch them eat. Looking for ways to improve education in the city? Go to the best districts, the best schools, the best classrooms, and find answers that can be shared with every classroom, school and district in the five boroughs.

I think we have had enough of the "fad diets" of "new" programs and theories propagated by those who seem to speak only "educationese." For too many years we have searched for that one idea, that program, which too often have been purposeless pits into which money and students have been thrown in the hope that, as if by magic, an educated society will suddenly come into being.

Too often these programs have sucked money and time and talented individuals away from the work of providing the fundamental education all students, in every classroom, deserve. Like olestra, these miracle programs provide a flash of tastiness that often robs students of basic educational nutrients.

We are at a time of transition for our school system because educational reform, political reform and social reform all, for once, seem to be happening at the same time. We may never have a better opportunity of building a future that will assure that future generations will enjoy olympic-grade minds that have grown strong on the healthiest of educational diets and the most vigorous of intellectual exercise.

It's clear to me there is no educational olestra in Chancellor Crew's program of excellence for our 1 million students.

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