

KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

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In 2019, only 35 percent of fourth-graders were proficient, on-level readers.

After a year and a half of pandemic altered learning, various reports suggest that kids are months, if not years, behind where they should be. In classrooms across the country, we've got an alarmingly high number of third-graders who are reading at a first-grade level.

We have a reading problem: a fundamental issue that impacts the entire trajectory of a kid's future, and our societal future too.

So as I browsed the upcoming school board elections here in Houston, Texas, and listened to candidates, of course this widening educational gap was among the largest of their concerns, right?

Nope.

The main topic was something different: Critical Race Theory, or CRT for short.

Fear not, this isn't an article about CRT, closing the reading gap, or even education in general. It's about how our focus on what actually matters all too easily gets hijacked.

It is easier to focus on the small things and make them seem big then it is to identify the actual items that matter most, and go to work on them. Take the gym-goer who obsesses over the optimal exercises, sets, and reps to perform, while they often struggle to train more than once per week. Or the writer who spends so much time perfecting their idea and outline, that they fail to write frequently enough to learn what resonates with others.

It's easier to tackle the small things. To reply to emails, to spend 20-minutes stretching or foam rolling, to spend our time tweeting angry things in the name of making change. With each small thing we get done or try to address, we get a hit of feel-good neurochemicals, reinforcing that we're on the right path. We fall in love with that *feeling* of making progress, taking a stand, or seeming like we're accomplishing something. The issue, of course, is sometimes that feeling is just that: nothing more than a feeling.

It is much more difficult to tackle the reading gap, to truly address inequity and inequality, to perform the hard running workout week after week, to change the culture of your workplace, versus all the superficial problems and solutions you can take on, often from the convenience of the device in your pocket. Yet it is usually the [difficult work that makes a meaningful difference](#); and also the kind of work that doesn't give us instant satisfaction.

In the words of good friend and renowned strength coach Dan John, *keep the main things the main thing*. To do so, ask two simple questions:

1. In my current pursuit or activity, what is the main thing? What is the big bucket item I'm trying to work on, change, and so forth?
2. Is this action supporting or moving me forward toward the main thing?

(As an aside: so much of the crap on social media that hides behind the facade of "making a difference" actually probably passes this heuristic because for these people I bet the main thing is usually to gain more followers, likes, retweets, and so on...)

The point isn't to minimize the small things. It's not to say you can't be for or against something small, or that you shouldn't worry about the details. You absolutely can and sometimes should. The point is to keep them in their rightful place, as small items that may be important and may make a difference. But you shouldn't pass over or neglect the main thing in order to pursue them.

—Steve

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