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on education

Diane Ravitch

Howard Gardner

Theodore R.Sizer

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Jeffrey Mirel

Robert Boyers

Thomas Bender

Andrew Delbanco

Joseph A. Buttigieg

Antonio Gramsci

David E. Bloom &

Joel E. Cohen

Education after the culture wars 5

The study of the humanities 22

A better way 26

Not to worry? 30

An intractable debate 33

The culture wars continue 36

A view from the schoolhouse 41

Class notes 45

The decline of civic education 49

Why a common curriculum? 56

Reforming the disciplines 59

It all comes down to the teachers 63

On Gramsci 67

From the 'Prison Notebooks' 71

Education for all: an unfinished revolution 84

poetry

Larissa Szporluk

Death of Magellan 97

fiction

Madison Smartt Bell

Petrified forest 98

notes

James Carroll

on the crisis in Catholicism 114

Richard A. Shweder

on the return of the 'civilizing project' 117

Donald Kennedy

on science at a crossroads 122

Richard Sennett

on welfare & the psychology of dependence 126

Diane Ravitch

Education after the culture wars

Suppose most of our nation's schools, through some unknown mechanism, decided to stop teaching history and literature. Suppose our educators went along with this practice because it was so widely accepted, and so far advanced, that no one person could stop it. Individual teachers might still be allowed to make their idiosyncratic decisions about what to teach. Social studies teachers with a keen interest in history could still teach it, and language arts teachers would be left undisturbed if they decided to teach *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Gilgamesh*, or whatever literary remnants of a bygone culture they personally val-

ued. Such teachers could be safely ignored, because everyone else would understand that such people were renegades who in time would retire and disappear.

We are not at that point of cultural amnesia yet. But our schools are moving perceptibly in that direction – and no one seems to know how to reverse the trend.

Certainly there is broad public support for educational reform, or so the pollsters tell us. The public knows vaguely that something is amiss and is concerned about the quality of the schools. In the spring of 2001, Congress endorsed a plan drafted by President George W. Bush that calls for annual national tests of reading and mathematics in grades three through eight. Four years earlier, President Bill Clinton had proposed federal funding for similar national tests of reading in the fourth grade and mathematics in the eighth grade.

Yet there is reason to wonder whether the proposed reforms will be able to remedy the underlying problems within education that not only drag down student achievement, but also undermine the teaching of history and literature.

A few years ago, I had a rare opportunity to see firsthand the strange political dynamic that has robbed our education-

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al system of much of its coherence. In 1997, I was appointed by the Secretary of Education to serve on the board of a small federal agency called the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which has administered federal tests known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress to samples of American students for the past thirty years. That same year, shortly after President Clinton recommended national testing, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a \$50 million contract to a consortium of test publishers to develop such tests. A few months later, when the responsibility for the new tests was handed over to the NAGB, I was able to observe the extraordinary self-censorship practiced by the educational publishing industry in this country and to ponder its likely consequences for our society.

As a historian of education, I have been an interested onlooker and occasional participant in the culture wars, the highly publicized battles of the past generation over whose history and whose literature should be taught in our schools. My own research has persuaded me that some of this skirmishing was just another episode in the long history of anti-intellectualism in American education.

In order to reveal and (perhaps) counteract the tendency to downgrade intellectual content, I had helped in the late 1980s to develop a national test of history and literature; administered only once, it demonstrated how woefully little high-school seniors knew about what was supposedly our common cultural heritage. In the early 1990s, as an assistant secretary of education in the first Bush administration, I actively promoted federal support for national academic standards.

It was, I believe, because of this back-

ground as a longtime supporter of standards that the Clinton administration invited me to join the NAGB as it assumed responsibility for the president's testing initiative. Although I am a registered independent, I had served in a Republican administration, and so my appointment by the Clinton administration was, it seemed, a signal of bipartisan support for higher standards in American education – just as President Clinton's initiative implied that one chapter in the culture wars was drawing to a close.

In my work as a member of the NAGB, I was primarily involved in the effort to establish clear standards for the curriculum in America's grade schools. But what I learned in this setting suggests that the problems within American education run deep, and that these problems have grave implications, not just for America's primary schools, but also for its colleges and universities – and, indeed, for the future of our common culture.

For how, in a society as varied and rapidly changing as our own, can a common culture survive without a clear commitment to broadly shared standards for the teaching of literature and history? And absent any such shared culture, how can we communicate across lines of race, religion, ethnicity, and social class in order to forge common purposes?

As a member of the NAGB, I reviewed one- and two-page passages that had been prepared by the testing consortium for President Clinton's "voluntary national test" of reading in the fourth grade. Most of these passages had been previously published in children's magazines or in recent anthologies.

After I had read about a dozen such passages, a combination of fiction and nonfiction, I realized that the readings

themselves had a cumulative subtext: the hero was never a white boy. Instead, the leading character – the one who was most competent, successful, and sympathetic – was invariably either a girl (of any race) or a nonwhite boy. Almost without exception, white boys were portrayed as weak and dependent. In one story, a white boy in a difficult situation weeps and says plaintively, “If only my big sister were here, I would know what to do.”

The passages, I discovered, had been edited to eliminate anything that might be perceived by anyone as a source of bias. In an essay on a giant sequoia tree, for example, the editors deleted a phrase that compared the sequoia’s shape to that of a Christmas tree because the analogy was considered religious and might be offensive to non-Christians. Another phrase in the same essay was dropped as sexist because it described a branch of the sequoia tree as so wide that a seven-foot man could stretch across it without being able to extend either his fingers or his toes over the edge.

A passage from a well-known fable was also edited to remove the moral of the story. The original had ended with the conclusion that “God helps those who help themselves.” To avoid any reference to a deity, the editors had replaced this phrase with the advice that “People should try to work things out for themselves whenever possible.”

I did not know whether these editorial revisions were the work of an unusually sensitive group of editors, or whether there was some predetermined policy at work. My puzzlement ended in mid-1998 when our committee met with representatives of Riverside Publishing, the company that was selecting the passages for the voluntary national test, editing them, and writing test questions.

When I asked why so few reading passages were drawn from classic children’s literature, the publisher explained that it was a well-accepted principle in educational publishing that everything written before 1970 was rife with racism and sexism. Only stories written after that date, he said, were likely to have acceptable language and appropriate multicultural sensitivity.

To clarify what was acceptable and what was unacceptable, the publisher gave our committee a copy of the company’s guidelines, called *Bias and Sensitivity Concerns in Testing*. These guidelines describe what sort of content and what sort of language can (and cannot) be included in educational tests.

Riverside’s guidelines are in no way unusual. Almost every major education publisher in the United States has issued similar guidelines. They express the explicit consensus that now governs the educational publishing industry and that shapes the language and content not only of tests, but also of mass-market textbooks.

The passages we were reading, I discovered, had been screened to assure that they did not include any “language, symbols, gestures, words, phrases, or examples that are generally regarded as sexist, racist, otherwise offensive, inappropriate, or negative toward any group.”

That seemed reasonable. But the guidelines also require that tests must be “free of subject matter that many would consider controversial or emotionally charged,” for fear that upsetting material might distract test takers and prevent them from showing their true ability. Anything that could conceivably cause a student discomfort is considered a form of bias, requiring heavy editing or the omission of the objectionable passage.

According to the Riverside guidelines,

the tests had to be carefully screened for:

- representational fairness;
- language usage;
- stereotyping; and
- controversial subject matter.

Applying the principle of “representational fairness” requires a test reviewer to determine whether a particular subgroup is overrepresented or underrepresented; whether the subjects portrayed are sufficiently diverse in terms of “ethnicity, age, socioeconomic background, community setting, and physical disabilities”; and whether test materials are “relevant to the life experiences of the test taker.” According to the criterion of relevance, it would be unfair, for example, to ask students who live in Florida to answer questions about “snow and freezing winters,” just as it would be unfair to ask students in Wyoming about oceans, or students in Indiana about mountains.

The language used in the tests was also carefully scrutinized for signs of bias. Almost any use of the word “man,” whether by itself, in a suffix (as in “salesman” or “workman”), or in a colloquial phrase (“the man in the street” or “mankind”), is treated as an unacceptable form of gender bias.

Not only tests but textbooks are to be purged of certain ways of referring to people with disabilities or social disadvantages. The writers are directed not to speak of “the blind,” but only of “a person who is blind.” Similarly, it is unacceptable to write “Terrence was a victim of polio”; this has to be replaced by “Terrence had polio as a child.” Or consider this sample sentence: “Even though she was a poor, Hispanic woman, Maria was able to start a successful company.” Such a sentence is outlawed by the guidelines as elitist and patronizing, and it would have to be revised: “Through hard work

and determination, Maria Sanchez started a successful company.”

Even more striking is the long list of forbidden stereotypes in the Riverside guidelines: men shown as “strong, brave, and silent,” women shown as “weepy, fearful, and emotional”; boys playing sports, or girls playing with dolls; Irish policemen; Asian Americans working in a laundry or a produce market; African Americans working as maids; men working as lawyers, doctors, or plumbers; women working as nurses or secretaries; older people or people with disabilities shown as dependent on others; elderly people suffering from physical deterioration; men playing sports or working with tools; women cooking and caring for children; older people fishing and baking cookies; Asian Americans portrayed as academics; African Americans portrayed as athletes; Caucasians portrayed as businesspeople; men portrayed as breadwinners; women portrayed as homemakers; and children portrayed as “bundles of energy.”

The claim that a story reflects the world as it really exists – or, alternatively, that a story is a work of imagination – cannot counter the charge of stereotyping. Indeed, Riverside invites its writers to *fight* stereotypes by reversing the role of key characters. For example, an older person might be depicted as a participant in an athletic event. A mother might be shown fixing a roof, while a father tends to a sick child.

The guidelines dictate that emotionally charged topics be avoided on tests, for fear that mention of them might upset sensitive children. The forbidden topics (in alphabetical order) include:

- abortion;
- creatures that are considered scary or dirty (e.g., scorpions, rats, and roaches);

- death, disease, violence, weapons, and natural catastrophes, such as fires and earthquakes;
- disrespectful or criminal behavior;
- evolution (there can be no discussion of the origins of the universe, nor any mention of fossils and dinosaurs since they imply evolution);
- high-priced consumer goods or vacations, because the families of some children can afford neither expensive items nor vacations;
- magic, witchcraft, and the supernatural;
- personal appearance (e.g., any specific description of height and weight);
- politics;
- religion (even casual references to religious holidays are prohibited);
- social problems (e.g., poverty, alcoholism, child abuse, animal abuse, divorce, or addiction);
- unemployment;
- unsafe situations, unhealthy habits, junk food, and references to even common drugs such as aspirin.

In addition, the guidelines ban references to so-called negative or sensitive material. As the authors of the Riverside guidelines explain with characteristic thoroughness, negative material includes, but is not limited to, parents quarreling and children mistreating each other, disobeying their parents, or generally showing disrespect for authority. Sensitive material includes references to Satanism, paganism, parapsychology, magic, extraterrestrials, Halloween, ghosts, witches, and the like, even in a fantasy context. Pumpkins and masks have become tainted by their association with Halloween and should be avoided. References to gambling are not acceptable. Avoid topics dealing with nudity or implied nudity, pregnancy, and birth, whether to animals or people. Avoid top-

ics related to controversial styles of music such as rap or rock and roll.

If the Riverside guidelines seem incredible, bear in mind that these rules typify the guidelines used today by most major American publishers of educational materials. Some, like the Macmillan-McGraw Hill multicultural guidelines, *Respecting Diversity* (1993), are even *more* restrictive in specifying what constitutes bias and stereotyping.

And it is not just writers who must toe the line. Illustrators must not use pink for baby girls or blue for baby boys. Out is the old-fashioned idea that females care more about their appearance than males do: today's illustrator must portray both sexes "preening in front of a mirror," with Dad using a blow-dryer.

A strong tone of cultural resentment pervades the Macmillan-McGraw Hill bias guidelines; they suggest that white European American males have received too much credit in the past and that the textbook writers must compensate by highlighting the accomplishments of women and members of minority groups in every subject field, including science and mathematics. Although the guidelines insist on the extensive diversity among Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans, "European Americans" are treated as if they were members of a single undifferentiated group, rather than people who originated in a continent of many different nationalities, languages, ethnicities, and religions (just like "Asian Americans," "Hispanic Americans," "Native Americans," and "African Americans"). In reality, all of these groups are purely social constructions, made in the USA; no such group identities exist outside the United States.

The *Multicultural Guidelines* published by Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley

(1996) further complicate the already near-impossible task of the textbook writer. According to these guidelines, the aim of a textbook is not simply to help students master a specific field of knowledge; the goal is rather to create nothing less than “a Multicultural Person.”

According to these *Multicultural Guidelines*, every group has its own “historically-honed worldview” and its own “values, norms, expectations, and beliefs.” The guidelines emphasize the overriding importance of “groupness,” ignoring the evidence of group intermingling caused by economic mobility, increased education, and rising rates of intermarriage in the United States in recent years. Students are expected to learn how membership in a group shapes the way a person “thinks, acts, and believes,” as well as the way a person is perceived by others. At the same time, students will be reminded of the danger of deploying stereotypes. The properly trained Multicultural Person will never allow “useful, flexible group generalizations to harden into inflexible distortions of group stereotyping.”

A reader is left to wonder: when is a generalization about a particular set of people a good application of “groupness” – and when is it just an old-fashioned stereotype?

The worst aspect of all of these guidelines is that strict application of them entails the exclusion of classic literature from reading textbooks. Neither the Riverside nor the Macmillan-McGraw Hill nor the Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley guidelines require that a certain proportion of textbooks be set aside for classic literature. None requires that stories and poems by significant nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers be included, even if they do not meet the letter of the bias rules.

After all, few, if any, classic children’s authors can meet the requirements of the textbook guidelines. Most of them were unaware of the need for balanced demographic representation. Most of them also assumed that children could imagine worlds that were very different from those they had personally experienced.

That helps to explain why so many American children now arrive in college without ever having read anything by writers such as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Ellison, Joseph Conrad, Willa Cather, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jack London, Edith Wharton, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, George Orwell, or Charles Dickens. Insofar as such writers flunk the tests laid out by textbook publishers, they risk slipping quietly out of circulation.

Given the concentration of ownership in the textbook industry, in which a small number of publishers dominate sales across the nation, the new censors wield enormous power. A few publishing officials determine what words and subjects are suitable for consumption in a great many of the nation’s classrooms. If they hope to work for the educational publishing industry, writers and illustrators must follow the guidelines with care.

Following the guidelines with care can lead to horrible results. In June of 2000, a vigilant parent compared literary passages used on the New York State Regents examinations in English to their original versions. She found that most of them had been expurgated to remove anything that was remotely controversial, in some cases making the author’s intention unrecognizable. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s memoir was bowdlerized to remove any references to religion, which destroyed the sense of it. References to

race, ethnicity, religion, sex, mild profanity, and alcohol were deleted. In one passage, the adjective “skinny” was changed to “thin,” and “fat” was changed to “heavy,” presumably to protect the feelings of children who were skinny or fat. Although New York’s “sensitivity” guidelines are minimal compared to those used by many publishers, its sensitivity reviewers removed whatever they thought might give offense to anyone, without the knowledge or permission of living authors. The public revelation of the damage wrought by the absurdity of the sensitivity review was so embarrassing to the State Education Department that the State Commissioner of Education promptly agreed to stop cutting literary classics used on the exams.

Although the fracas in New York brought attention to the common practice of bowdlerization, there is a danger that it will encourage test publishers to avoid literary passages in the future. Many already believe that all literature written before 1970 is hopelessly riddled with racism and sexism. It is so much easier for them to use only reading passages that they commission, written by anonymous freelance authors who keep the bias guidelines in front of them and who do not own their words. The contract writers know in advance which words, which images, which stereotypes, and which insensitive language to avoid.

As the sensitivity rules have become more onerous, some writers and illustrators have simply given up. Some years ago, the *New York Times* described the case of an artist who had stopped accepting assignments to illustrate children’s textbooks after receiving a ten-page, single-spaced document specifying the guidelines for a single story. “The hero was a Hispanic boy,” the artist

explained to the *Times*; “there were black twins, one boy, one girl; an overweight Oriental boy, and an American Indian girl. That leaves the Caucasian. Since we mustn’t forget the physically handicapped, she was born with a congenital malformation and only had three fingers on one hand. . . . They also had a senior citizen, and I had to show her jogging.”

Current textbook guidelines have an insidious effect not just on writers and artists, but on the integrity of the texts themselves. Today’s textbooks in science and mathematics abound in references to the race, ethnicity, and gender of scientists and mathematicians and to events that occurred in other cultures, even when the references and events bear no relation to the lessons. Dr. William Bennetta, who edits *The Textbook Letter*,¹ has identified numerous instances in which textbooks have sacrificed accuracy of content for multicultural consciousness-raising.

In a popular high-school biology text, for example, there is a two-page feature titled “A Day in the Life of a Physically Challenged Person,” accompanied by an assignment to write about whether one’s own classroom is accessible to a person in a wheelchair; neither the story nor the assignment has any relation to biology. A textbook on driver education includes a sidebar about a movie-stunt woman who is completely deaf. A mathematics textbook contains blurbs about tennis star Venus Williams, author Alex Haley, and other multicultural items that have no connection to the subject of the text. Similar irrelevant features are scattered throughout textbooks in every subject.

Standardized tests of all kinds have also been affected by multicultural con-

¹ His publication appears on the web at <<http://www.textbookleague.org>>.

cerns. Tests are routinely screened for content or topics or language that might unfairly affect the performance of specific racial, ethnic, and gender groups – psychometricians call this “differential item function” (DIF). What began as a sensible effort to weed out subtle as well as overt forms of racial and gender bias has evolved into a strenuous program to banish any test questions that *may* be associated with group differences in performance, even though the questions themselves are not in any way biased, as that word is commonly understood.

The Educational Testing Service currently recommends avoiding certain topics that allegedly lower the test scores of female, African American, and Hispanic American students. Topics to be avoided include the military and sports. Also to be avoided are questions that use a specialized vocabulary to test a student’s knowledge of farming, finance, law, politics, science, technology, tools, and transportation. Ironically, researchers have consistently failed to demonstrate that students who are female, African American, and Hispanic will get higher scores if these topics are eliminated.²

Debates over the content of America’s textbooks and educational tests have, of course, been raging for many years now. But what is not at all well understood, even by the educated public, is the extent of the censorship imposed by the bias and sensitivity standards that cur-

rently prevail. Even worse, the range of forbidden knowledge seems to just keep growing – as I discovered during my tenure on the NAGB.

After our board approved various reading passages, based on their quality and suitability, for use on the “voluntary national tests” proposed by President Clinton, they were forwarded to a bias and sensitivity review panel. This panel recommended the deletion of several passages we had approved. (The Clinton administration’s voluntary national tests, by the way, were developed but never deployed due to bipartisan opposition in Congress.)

Two of the passages selected for deletion were about peanuts. One focused on the history of the peanut (with particular attention to the scientific contributions of George Washington Carver) and the other on the peanut’s nutritional value. The bias panel objected to the first passage because it included a statement that peanuts were exported from Brazil after Portuguese explorers defeated many tribes. (The bias reviewers believed that this wording would offend someone, but I wasn’t sure whom: maybe people who don’t like the word “tribe”? People who object to the historical role of Portuguese explorers?) The second passage on peanuts bothered the bias panel because it neglected to mention that some people are allergic to peanuts.

The bias panel also proposed to drop a passage about a heroic blind mountain climber because it implied that people who are blind are worse off than sighted people and have a more difficult time facing dangers like mountain climbing.

The bias panel wanted to kill an informative story about the life of African American educator Mary McLeod Bethune because it did not approve of the

2 For a comprehensive review of research on how different topics affect children from different racial, ethnic, and gender groups, see Paul W. Holland and Howard Wainer, eds., *Differential Item Functioning* (Mahway, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993). See especially chapter sixteen by Elizabeth and Nancy Burton, “The Effect of Item Screening on Test Scores and Test Characteristics,” 321 – 335; they conclude that “screening for DIF does not change mean scores of women or minorities.”

name of the school she founded in Daytona, Florida, in 1904: the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls. The reviewers thought African American children might be offended by the school's name. A fable by Aesop in which the clever Fox persuaded the vain Crow to drop her cheese was rejected as gender biased.

The panel also proposed deletion of a charming story in which a rotting stump in the forest, which served as home to successive groups of insects, birds, snakes, and small animals, was compared to an apartment house. The bias panel found the analogy demeaning and claimed that it might reinforce stereotypes about apartment dwellers, or even trigger a negative emotional response among children living in housing projects.

This sort of censorship has no end.

Only the blandest, least controversial, and ultimately least interesting passages can pass through such a fine filter. The only authors likely to pass muster consistently are those who have been commissioned to write, to order, for the tests and textbooks.

This is an awfully weak foundation upon which to build a curriculum. How can we transmit our culture to the younger generation if we teach only what was written in the past dozen or so years? Is the culture created prior to 1970 so corrupt that it should be locked away and forgotten? Should we allow our cultural heritage to be hijacked by a handful of self-righteous pedagogical censors?

It would not be too big a stretch to assert that the McGuffey readers of the nineteenth century contained not only better literature than our own bowdlerized texts, but also more honest writing about the realities of contemporary society – poverty, crime, unemployment, class differences, and social injustice.

By ensuring that students never read anything that might possibly offend them, current textbook guidelines reinforce a sugarcoated and narcissistic view of culture, as if books and poems and historical narratives were ephemeral commodities – meant mainly to make us all feel better about ourselves.

Perhaps my indictment seems too strong. After all, periodic surveys by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature at the State University of New York at Albany have reported that the “most popular titles” in high school are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Julius Caesar*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Great Gatsby*. However, this list of titles has been compiled by asking English department chairs in a sample of high schools to list “for each grade in your school the book-length works of literature which all students in *any* English class study.” The department chairs, notice, are not asked to list the works of literature that *all* students in each grade will study, or even the works that students in *every* English class will study. As a result, department chairs are free to regard a work of literature as among “the most popular” even if only the students enrolled in an advanced placement course actually read the work.

Even when great works of literature are taught, they are often taught carelessly in an effort to purge the reading experience of potentially disturbing difficulties. Writing in a recent issue of *The American Educator*, a college professor acidly described a class of incoming freshmen. Most of them assume that “all theories and opinions are of equal value, as are all readings of works of fiction – regardless of the facts of the case.” Students often told him, “My high-school teacher told me that a poem can mean anything I want it to mean.” Unable to

imagine the concerns of other people living in other times, these students have been taught instead to express invariably their *own* concerns when confronted with any given cultural artifact: “whether the text is the Bible, Shakespeare, or Toni Morrison, students read only themselves over and over, with the predictable results that the greater their ignorance the higher their self-esteem.”

With exceptions, mainly accounted for by idiosyncratic teachers and elite schools, a disturbing pattern has emerged from the reforms of recent decades: a curriculum without content – and a new consensus that only this kind of curriculum can properly meet the needs of modern American society.

The emergent consensus over the contentless curriculum is the result of a variety of social and political factors, some of them of long standing. Certain strains of educational progressivism, as I showed in my book *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*, regarded the traditional curriculum as elitist and sought to replace academic subjects with utilitarian activities connected to everyday life. Since the early years of the last century, the academic curriculum has been forced to compete with demands for vocational education, industrial education, and life-adjustment education. The child-centered strain of progressivism, as represented by William Heard Kilpatrick in the 1920s and 1930s and later in the 1960s by A. S. Neill, asserted that children learn best in the absence of *any* set curriculum: it is the students, not the teachers, who should be directing the course of study.

Educational psychologists launched a different sort of attack against the content of the curriculum by changing the way students were tested. In the early decades of the twentieth century, psy-

chologists brashly claimed that they could measure not only what children had learned, but what they were capable of learning. Cloaked with the authority of science, they belittled teacher-made tests and essays as too subjective and unscientific. One of their casualties was the College Board examinations, which relied heavily on elaborate and detailed student answers; these exams were replaced in 1941 by the multiple-choice Scholastic Aptitude Test. Psychometricians liked the SAT because it was objective, reliable, and could be scored by a machine. The old College Boards had tested mastery of a prescribed curriculum and included an annual list of what literary classics students were expected to know; the SAT claimed to be content-free. The changeover from the old College Boards to the SAT removed one of the vital supports of the traditional academic curriculum.

For much of the past century, the leaders of the nation’s education schools – an eclectic mix of progressive pedagogical experts and psychometric experts – have seen themselves (sometimes heroically) as the vanquishers of the academic tradition. In every subject field, progressive educators have assailed the established order, whether it be the teaching of literary classics in English, the study of events in chronological order in history, or the mastery of computational skills in mathematics.

Thus, when the culture wars began in the late 1960s, the antagonists of a traditional curriculum were pushing against an open door. When critics on the Left complained that English classes paid too much attention to the writings of dead white men and that the characters and stories represented women and minority group members in demeaning ways, the status quo had few defenders. When the critics said that these omissions and rep-

representations damaged the self-esteem of students from these groups, many education leaders agreed: the system was guilty as charged. When critics said that too much attention was being paid in social studies classes to the actions of white males, educational publishers rushed to revise their textbooks, even hiring some of the critics to serve as in-house consultants on the issues that troubled them.

But the pressure for change did not come only from the Left. By the 1970s, members of the religious Right had joined the crusade against the traditional curriculum, lobbying publishers to purge anything that might give offense to the faithful. In his book *Battleground: One Mother's Crusade, the Religious Right, and the Struggle for Control of Our Classrooms*, Stephen Bates recounts a legal challenge to the popular Holt reading series by fundamentalist Christian parents in rural Tennessee. The parents accused the Holt series of teaching secular humanism and violating their religious beliefs. As part of the litigation, Holt, Rinehart & Winston released over two thousand pages of internal files, which detailed the inner workings of the textbook publishing process and revealed (in Bates's words) the company's "almost pathological fear of controversy."

The memoranda circulated among writers and editors showed their desperate efforts to placate any protests about gender, race, and ethnicity by revising their guidelines and content. By 1977, at least half of all characters in stories and illustrations had to be female, and representations of minority groups were closely scrutinized to avoid stereotyped behavior. As the publisher's guidelines evolved, the rules for representation grew more elaborate (Jews must not be shown as "diamond cutters, doctors, dentists, lawyers, classical musicians,

tailors, shopkeepers, etc.," and the elderly must not be depicted "in rocking chairs, knitting, napping, and watching television"); authors, stories, and photos were chosen not for their literary quality or their contribution to teaching reading, but on the basis of "the latest U.S. population figures."

Even though the fundamentalists' critique of the Holt reading series ultimately failed in the courts, educational publishers took their complaints to heart and added evolution, religion, divorce, disobedient children, Satanism, magic, and fantasy to the list of forbidden topics in children's textbooks and standardized tests of reading comprehension.

Consequently, the content of today's textbooks and tests reflects a remarkable convergence of the interests of feminists and multiculturalists on one side and the religious Right on the other. No words or illustrations may be used that might offend the former groups, and no topics can be introduced that might offend those on the other side of the ideological divide. The Left gets censorship of language usage and pictures, and the Right gets censorship of topics.

The new consensus that undergirds the contentless curriculum is built on certain assumptions: that America lacks any common, shared culture worth speaking of, much less preserving; that there are no particular literary works that should be read by all students; that historical studies are problematic insofar as they require students to memorize and recall certain facts (this is derided as "rote learning"). The traditional curriculum could have been expanded to make it more inclusive of women and minority groups, but instead critics attacked its very nature. They derided it for emphasizing a "canon" and for expecting students to master a "body of knowledge"

(the notion of “mastery” was itself suspect). Once the very idea of mastering a specific set of facts and texts was discredited, there was nothing left to teach but various methods, such as “basic skills,” “discovery learning,” “critical thinking,” and “problem solving.”

The failure of the publishers to defend the integrity of their textbooks was not entirely their fault. When critics assailed them, the publishers could expect no support from state education departments, which were equally averse to controversy, nor could they turn to the schools of education, which hastened to express their solidarity with the critics, nor could they seek aid from professional associations. The American Historical Association had long before accepted the submergence of school history into the amorphous field of social studies; primary- and secondary-school history teachers didn't even have a professional organization to represent them. Nor was the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) concerned about the steady whittling away of recognized literature in the school readers. That organization became politicized in the 1970s and was more concerned about social issues than about teaching classic literature or standard English. The “national standards” produced by the NCTE and the International Reading Association in 1994 failed to mention even a single piece of literature that all American students should read. Besides, the leaders of the major academic organizations in both history and English were themselves too devoted to issues of race and gender to challenge those who pushed beneficent self-censorship onto the educational publishing industry.

Because the new consensus permeates the educational establishment, it has affected the course of the current struggle

to raise educational standards – and not just at the federal level.

Over the past decade, every state but Iowa has written new academic standards, which describe what students are expected to learn at different grade levels in every subject area. These standards are supposed to be a guide for students, teachers, parents, textbook publishers, and test developers. The standards are particularly important as a guide to assessment: a state cannot ask questions on standardized tests about topics that were not specifically included in the state standards; if it did, some students would be at an unfair disadvantage, since they would be tested on material they had not necessarily been taught.

The most common failings of state standards in social studies is that they either omit history altogether, or they set expectations for learning it that are absurdly grandiose.

For example, an early draft of the Illinois social studies standards asked high-school seniors to “assess the long-term consequences of major decisions by leaders in various nations of the world, drawing information from a variety of traditional, electronic and on-line sources.” The same document directed seniors to “compare and contrast varying interpretations of major events in selected periods of time.” After loud complaints, the standards were slightly revised. One of the new standards for seniors became: “Analyze how the United States's political history has been influenced by the nation's economic, social and environmental history.”

In Ohio, seniors are expected to “explain how past events in the world and the United States have impacted events/issues today,” and “explain how different choices in the past could have led to different results today.”

In New Jersey, seniors are supposed to “synthesize historical facts and interpretations to reach personal conclusions about significant historical events” and to “compare and contrast divergent interpretations of historical turning points, using available evidence.”

It is noteworthy that these standards do not refer to any particular events or issues or time periods. They sound impressively comprehensive. But they are so vague that they cannot be tested and should not be considered a “standard.”

The English standards in most states are similarly blank about what students should read. At present, no state identifies any specific work of literature that students should have read at any grade level. Only a few states append a list of recommended readings.

Such lists are invariably controversial. When Massachusetts issued as an appendix to its state standards “A Suggested List of Authors, Illustrators, or Works Reflecting Our Common Literary and Cultural Heritage,” one principal complained about “a return to pell-mell coverage – opening up kids’ heads and pouring stuff in. I thought we were getting away from that.” Another principal declared that distributing a list of literary “greats” was a step backward: “All it does is codify a rigid bias about learning and culture.” Others condemned the list as too white, too male, and too Eurocentric, even though it did include writers who were neither male nor white.

The moral of this story about state standards is all too clear. Any effort to prescribe content will provoke controversy. And remaining silent about “content” has one obvious advantage: no one can complain about “what” is taught if there is no “what” to argue about.

Politically, the path of least resistance has been to issue “standards” that of-

ferend no one. Controversy is far more likely to erupt in response to sins of commission than to sins of omission. So omission is the order of the day – a goal achieved by concentrating on skills while ignoring content.

Since most state standards do not include any specific content, the state tests of English cannot ask questions that assume any specific prior knowledge. When taking a test, students are given a poem or short story and asked to answer questions about it, either in multiple-choice, short-answer, or extended-essay form. They are tested on their ability to analyze an unfamiliar passage, not to reflect on a text they have previously studied.

Most state history exams similarly assume no prior knowledge. Tests typically include “document-based” questions, in which students are asked to analyze a document (for example, a cartoon, a short passage, or an excerpt from an article) that pertains to some historical issue; the correct answer can be found by reading the “documents” carefully, without knowing anything about the historical context. Also common is a type of question in which the student is given a quotation from some historical figure and then asked to pick a multiple-choice answer that captures the meaning of the quotation. The 1999 New York Regents exam in global history included a map question about “the Mongol Empires, 1200 – 1350,” which could be answered correctly without knowing anything about the Mongol Empires. Then there is the “historical” graph, which contains information about an issue like wages or unemployment or gross domestic product in certain decades; students are asked to read the chart to answer questions, which they can do without any knowledge of the historical period.

This approach to testing – similar to

that found on the SAT – is different from the one used for the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate examinations. Both of these elite programs publish a syllabus, which describes the material that will be examined; teachers and pupils prepare for the examination by studying the syllabus. The exams are based on specific, clear content standards. Students are expected to study specific events in history and specific works of literature in order to prepare for the exams.

To prepare for the new state tests, by contrast, a student need only be able to read and express an opinion. In effect, testing agencies and state education officials have figured out a way to administer “standards” that do not require any specific knowledge of literature or history.

And so it has come to pass. Despite the admirable efforts of well-intentioned reformers over the past decade, our nation’s schools need not teach a common set of facts about history – and they no longer feel it necessary to teach a common set of literary texts.

There are exceptions, of course, especially in private schools and elite suburban public schools. There are most certainly talented and dedicated teachers of English in every state who still teach classic literature, just as there are dedicated history teachers who still equip young people with a clear, chronological scaffolding of events, issues, and people.

Their efforts, however, receive scant support from the new state standards. These teachers teach what they teach out of personal conviction. And whether a student has such a teacher is – in most schools – almost entirely a matter of luck and demography.

Getting the chance to study great literature and learn about the historical

events that shaped our world should not be a matter of luck. It should be the consequence of well-considered educational policies that govern curriculum, classroom materials, teacher preparation, professional development, and testing.

Can we sustain a healthy civic culture when so few students (or adults) understand the evolution of our political democracy? Can we preserve a common culture when many high-school and even college graduates know little or nothing about our nation’s history and its literary heritage? Can we, even as we recognize increasing numbers of women and people of color among the ranks of great authors, simply abandon those earlier writers whose works inspired them?

Some would surely answer all of these questions in the affirmative. Some will disagree with me on every point.

But they will have to consider that the vacuum created by our failure is being filled not by cutting-edge critical theorists, but by the commercial entertainment industry. If we do not teach our children history, Walt Disney and Oliver Stone will do it for us. If we do not teach literature, the rising generation will be denied access to one of the smartest and most effective methods of forming critical and independent minds.

In a recent essay in *The New Republic*, Mario Vargas Llosa argues that new technologies cannot replace the book. Science and technology promote specialization, he remarks, but literature provides a common denominator for understanding human experience: it allows human beings to recognize each other across time and space. Through reading great literature, argues Vargas Llosa, we learn

what remains common in all of us under the broad range of differences that separate us. Nothing better protects a human

being against the stupidity of prejudice, racism, religious or political sectarianism, and exclusivist nationalism than this truth that invariably appears in great literature: that men and women of all nations and places are essentially equal, and that only injustice sows among them discrimination, fear, and exploitation.

Those hardest hit by the conditions I have described are the sons and daughters of parents who lack the means to send their children to outstanding suburban schools or to private schools. For these children, what is taught in school is all too often dreary stuff that cannot compete for their attention with the powerful stimuli they find on television, in the movies, in video games, and on the Internet.

For them, school is the Empire of Boredom. Little do they know or care that an entire industry of bias reviewers has insulated them from any contact in their textbooks with anything that might disturb them, like violence, death, divorce, or bad language.

No matter. When the school day is done, they will turn to the videos and music that feed them eroticized violence and surround them with language that knows no constraints. This is as wacky a combination as anyone might imagine: schools in which life has been homogenized, with all conflicts flattened out, within the context of an adolescent culture in which anything goes.

Schools cannot beat the entertainment industry at its own game. What they have to offer students is the chance for intellectual freedom, the power to think for themselves rather than the incentive to gorge themselves on the media's steady diet of junk food.

But under the present regime of censorship, the schools themselves are not intellectually free. Worse, they cannot awaken children's minds with great lit-

erature if they are restricted to only what was created in the past twenty or thirty years, and then to only the predigested pap that passes the industry's elaborate bias and sensitivity codes.

It is unrealistic, obviously, to expect the government to lead the way in establishing high standards for history and literature. As my own experience in the standards movement confirms, the government, like the educational publishing industry, abhors controversy – and establishing standards with real content is nothing if not controversial.

What, then, is to be done?

Parents must inform themselves. And even when they seem to be standing alone, they must insist upon something better than the current fare.

For their part, teachers must free themselves from the expectation that whatever they teach must boost children's self-esteem, and that whatever students read should mean whatever they think it means in light of their own personal experience.

There are also lessons to be learned from the surreptitious bowdlerization of test questions on the New York State Regents exams. The work of bias and sensitivity reviewers must be reviewed by nonexperts, by regular members of the public (like school-board members); their decisions to delete passages must be defensible and sensible. I also believe that there should be public access to and review of test passages that have been eliminated for bias reasons; let's all see what bias looks like and whether the experts' views pass muster in the light of day. In New York, the State Commissioner promptly realized that he could not justify what had happened once the state's actions were subject to public scrutiny. As a rule of thumb, the state should not do anything that makes it look ridiculous. If excerpts need to be

cut for reasons of length, it is easy enough to insert ellipses; high-school seniors should know what ellipses are.

Great literature in any event does not comfort us. It does not make us feel better about ourselves. It is not written to enhance our self-esteem or to make us feel that we are “included” in the story. It takes us into its own world and creates its own reality. It shakes us up; it makes us think. Sometimes it makes us cry.

The same is true for the study of history. It is possible to spend one’s time learning only about one’s own family or ethnic group. But there are worlds of adventure, worlds of tragedy awaiting us if we are willing to let go of our solipsism, our narcissism, our need to study only ourselves.

One of my favorite American educators is William Torrey Harris, who was U.S. commissioner of education at the beginning of the twentieth century and a prominent Hegelian. Harris was a great proponent of liberal education, and he believed that what young people needed was “self-alienation.” They needed, he said, to enter into worlds remote from their own, immerse themselves in the life of another civilization, and then return to their own, with a critical perspective honed by their experience in a different world. Harris suggested that teachers should challenge students, upend their settled ideas, and expose them to worlds far beyond their own experiences. Properly taught, literature and history can cultivate the sympathetic imagination, the capacity to leave one’s own world and empathically experience lives in other times and cultures.

There is a price to be paid for the flight from content and from knowledge during the past generation. As they advance in school, children recognize that what they see on television is more realistic than the sanitized world of their text-

books. The numbing nihilism of the contentless curriculum produced by the puritans on the Left and Right merely feeds a popular appetite for the exciting nihilism of an uncensored and sensationalized popular culture, skillfully produced by amoral entrepreneurs who are expert at targeting the tastes of bored teenagers.

Even worse, the situation I have described leads to a growing gap between the educated haves and the poorly schooled have-nots – two nations, separate and unequal. In my view, the great goal of education is not to cultivate an elite – it is to abolish class distinctions. The path down which we now are heading will make education not the great leveler, but a great divider.

We do not know how these trends may yet affect the quality of our politics, our civic life, and our ability to communicate with each other. The consequences can’t be good. As the technologies of the entertainment industry become more sophisticated, so too will its appeals to emotion, to feelings, to our basest instincts.

When we as a nation set out to provide universal access to education, our hope was that intelligence and reason would one day prevail and make a better world, that issues would be resolved by thoughtful deliberation. Intelligence and reason, however, cannot be achieved merely by skill-building and immersion in new technologies. Intelligence and reason cannot be developed absent the judgment that is formed by prolonged and thoughtful study of history, literature, and culture, not only that of our own nation, but that of other civilizations.

That we have turned away from such studies, that we have limited them to advanced classes in secondary schools, and that they have become electives in

higher education are not encouraging. As our common culture becomes constricted, so too does the possibility for informed citizens to debate the shape of their shared future. What we risk losing is part of the common fund of knowledge needed to sustain a truly democratic society.

I do not wish to sound like a Cassandra (a word that may appear biased because it suggests a fearful female), so I will not despair. Nor do I intend to be a Pollyanna (another word that may appear gender-biased).

But I do not believe that we should accept mediocrity as our fate. As scholars, as teachers, as parents, as citizens, we must reclaim our common culture – or risk seeing it disappear.

Responses to Diane Ravitch:

- Howard Gardner
The study of the humanities 22
- Theodore R.Sizer
A better way 26
- E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
Not to worry? 30
- Joyce Appleby
An intractable debate 33
- Catharine R. Stimpson
The culture wars continue 36
- Deborah Meier
A view from the schoolhouse 41
- Patricia Albjerg Graham
Class notes 45
- Jeffrey Mirel
The decline of civic education 49
- Robert Boyers
Why a common curriculum? 56
- Thomas Bender
Reforming the disciplines 59
- Andrew Delbanco
It all comes down to the teachers 63
-

*Education
after the
culture wars*

Theodore R. Sizer

A better way

While it was unlikely to have been her intention, Diane Ravitch's lively essay provides us with a powerful argument against centralized state and national control of the schools' curriculum.

A neat, "rigorous," and uniform American curriculum, with its accompanying assessments, is, perhaps, attractive to Ravitch and to me in the abstract – but in the particular *only* if my friends and I design and administer it. If other folks get their hands on it... well, I am not so sure, especially given the picture Ravitch paints. Under those circumstances, we had better not have detailed "national standards" from which all else would flow. We must find some other way to get American schooling up to snuff.

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Ravitch accurately portrays our children confronted by a "curriculum without content," this purveyed in a school that is an "Empire of Boredom." It all reminds me of what Charles Silberman in his warmly reviewed book *Crisis in the Classroom* had to say in 1970: "... what is mostly wrong with the public schools is due... to mindlessness." In the summary of his massive 1970s research project on American schooling, John I. Goodlad came to comparable conclusions. "Boredom," he wrote, "is a disease of epidemic proportions." The authors of the 1985 study *The Shopping Mall High School* zeroed in: "... Americans want high school to be genuinely accessible to virtually everyone... [but] Americans have profoundly different notions of what a proper high school education should be.... [I]n these circumstances the shopping mall is more than an apt metaphor...." That is, an education can be pap if the people want pap, or it can be powerful if that's what they want – and the definitions of "pap" and "powerful" are subject to debate by reasonable people.

David Tyack and Larry Cuban have recently made an important, related argument: "[S]chool reform is... a prime area for debating the shape of the future of the society." That is, the cur-

riculum, particularly if it is not pap and thereby has sharp cultural edges, is not likely to be found by the few and thereafter delivered without controversy unto the many. The curriculum as a statement of American priorities is something inevitably controversial. Ravitch's primal scream about the mess we are in is a familiar one.

Of course textbooks are a mishmash. Publishers must not only meet their budgets but also make money for their investors. Development costs for textbooks are high and profit margins are narrow, making the scale of sales crucial. In this situation, the publishers do what they can. No section of the country can be slighted or offended. Every possible matter must be explored. Comprehensiveness in point of view as well as material covered is a virtue. Compendious, mushy texts result.

Groups assigned to produce "curriculum frameworks" for a large district, a state, or the nation have the same problem. Most such committees are large and carefully chosen, with every major interest group included. The members struggle mightily and fight often: witness the battles over history and literature standards that Ravitch mentions. *Of course* they struggle, and we should be thankful that they do. The ideas that are to envelop America's children are important. Ravitch accurately sums up: "Any effort to prescribe content will provoke controversy." If that is the case, which of us has the right in this sturdy democracy to say "this will be the curriculum and the rest of you must go along with it"?

Neither textbook publishers nor those developing "curriculum frameworks" are subject to the discipline that every teacher faces in a classroom, "discipline" in the sense of doing what is necessary for *this* group of students to meet

this standard in a manner that displays not only these particular kids' grasp of the "facts" but their ability to apply them in both familiar and unfamiliar situations. Sweeping requirements are easy to list, and making the usually necessary choices among them is painful. Most committees stress the former and do whatever is necessary to avoid the latter. They do not have to live with their decisions.

Further, no two classrooms are ever quite alike. The largely Caucasian kids in my exurban public school are neither "better" nor "worse" scholars than the dozens of new Cambodian Americans in a nearby city. Should the history and literature offering and the method and pace of its presentation be precisely the same for all? I think not. However, how to respond to the differences is, again, a controversial matter. Abstract direction is easy. Dealing with the reality is something far more difficult. People who have never lived for a typical school year as an on-the-line teacher in a typical American high school are likely to oversimplify the work that must be done. Promulgated directives from afar are therefore highly likely to be simplistic and off the mark.

Finally, in reality it all comes down to the teachers. However brilliant the "curriculum frameworks" and however scholarly the textbooks, what the teachers do with them is most of the game. Ravitch surely would agree.

What, then, does it take to attract and hold the kinds of able people from whom we want our children to learn? Respect. A fair wage. Appropriate conditions of work. Authority.

The latter is crucial, as strong people do not take jobs that fail to entrust them with important things. The more that detailed decisions about my work as a teacher (or principal) are made by folk

far from my situation, the less attractive that situation is to me. Treat me like a mere distributor of what you think my kids need and in the standardized manner that you deem necessary, and I will avoid your profession. I know my teaching task is far more sophisticated and necessarily more nuanced than that. You cheapen my profession by oversimplifying it. In other words, unrestrained top-down direction, however necessary it appears in the short run, is a recipe for mediocrity or worse in the long run.

Ravitch suggests – again perhaps without intending to – a remedy for these problems in her mention of the success of private schools and of the Advanced Placement program of the College Board. Those schools and that program are matters of choice – in practice, primarily parental choice. If the schools fail, they lose customers. If an AP program is sloppy, schools do not recommend it and students are not subjected to it. A “market” is introduced. Decisions are kept at an immediate level, in an arena that is of human scale.

However, what about “standards”? Indeed. But reasonable people disagree over standards; these matters, as Ravitch wisely reminds us, are controversial. It is more than likely that there can be all sorts of respectable representations of “rigorous standards” in most areas beyond the obvious rudiments. There is no One Best Way.

If there is no One Best Way, how can we compare schools? We can’t, at least not precisely. Students’ ultimate habits of mind and grasp of serious subject matter do not lend themselves to precise assessment and authentic ranking. There is no magic metric of serious learning. Scholarship, happily, is more complicated than that. That complication should not make us shy away from judgments. It should, however, push us to make those judgments with caution and restraint.

And so, are we thus left with the mindless policy of letting all those flowers – and weeds – bloom?

No, absolutely not. If we do shy away from making any judgments, then many schools and school districts, especially those whose parent constituencies are not organized enough to insist on rigorous work, will cease to have reasonable “standards,” save the visible routines of school attendance. The children will effectively be warehoused, not energetically taught. The historical record is sadly clear on that point.

So, what then? Again, the remedy is visible in what Ravitch suggests with private schools and Advanced Placement programs. Private schools are actually the least of it. Choice is the most of it, and wealthier citizens exercise that choice by selecting residence in communities that have reputations for “strong schools.” Are those reputations always deserved? No, largely because their evaluation is heavily the result of gossip. However, regular state inspection (such as that crafted in Massachusetts for that state’s Charter schools and for all public schools in Rhode Island under its School Accountability for Learning and Teaching program) does provide a fair balance between local authority and state-level accountability. Are “choice with inspection” programs without flaws? No. They just have fewer flaws than top-down detailed direction and standardized testing of that which has been directed.

What about that “boredom” of which Ravitch writes? It is unlikely to be primarily, much less exclusively, a “curriculum” problem, especially one that can be remedied at a level of government far from classrooms. Rather, it is a problem with teaching; its antithesis is also teaching’s joy. The teacher’s wonderfully demanding trick is to catch each student’s attention with something of powerful intellectual or artistic merit, and to

hold it. The problem in most high schools (revealingly, less likely in private schools and the Advanced Placement courses of public schools) is that each teacher is assigned too many students to allow him or her to “catch” each youngster in a caring and thoughtful way.

Serious reform will have to start with each school itself. A first priority must be to ensure the conditions necessary to attract and hold the best and the brightest teachers. Everything else pales in importance. A legion of good teachers would not stand for the hollowness that Ravitch describes. While fiddling with texts and scripted curricula cannot necessarily hurt, such reform will not solve the problem Ravitch illuminates – and may indeed make matters worse.

Citations from sources other than the preceding essay by Diane Ravitch: Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Random House, 1970); John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects Toward the Future* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984); Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); and David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Not to worry?

All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
That ever was put forth in personal form –
Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal
thrones –
I pass them unalarmed.

– Wordsworth

Equipped with an unparalleled knowledge of American public education, Diane Ravitch offers telling illustrations of the ways in which American schools are perpetuating cultural fragmentation and a skills gap between rich and poor.

One can plausibly disagree with some of her conclusions. Theodore Sizer rea-

sonably questions whether textbook publishers should be assigned so much blame for the appalling mediocrity of textbooks, given the exactingly complex rules for state textbook adoption. He and Howard Gardner are legitimately skeptical about what I take to be an implication of Ravitch's essay – that schools across the nation should require students to read a common core of specific literary works. It would be nice if everybody knew *Hamlet* and *Huckleberry Finn*, but in practice it's much harder to gain principled agreement on an arbitrary list of literary works than on specific knowledge in history, science, math, and civics.

These are quibbles compared to the importance of the problems Ravitch has identified. A basic goal of public education in a democracy is to integrate future citizens into a national community of discourse based on common reference points and a common language, and, in a general sense, common loyalties and values. Another basic aim of democratic schooling is to form an autonomous citizenry capable of ruling itself. And most democracies, including our own, attempt to narrow the education gap between rich and poor, so that a person's life chances will be determined more by character and talent than by who one's parents happen to be. Diane Ravitch is

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alarmed that our public education is very far from meeting these basic democratic goals, partly because it cannot make up its mind about the specifics of a curriculum. I think she is right to be alarmed.

TheodoreSizer seems less alarmed. He appears to be just as concerned about Ravitch's proposed solution – instituting some degree of commonality in the school curriculum – as he is with the current shortcomings of American schooling. Yet his proposed solution to those shortcomings – attracting better teachers and letting them and their schools determine curriculum – is not a very concrete proposal, and appears to have its own practical and logical difficulties. Of course Sizer is right that having better teachers will improve teaching and learning. That sounds suspiciously like a tautology. Unfortunately, an incoherent school system such as the one we have, and such as the one Sizer continues to advocate, grinds down good teachers by its very incoherence. If there is little commonality in what students learn at a grade level, then the teacher of each successive grade faces the ever-mounting and finally impossible task of accommodating students with different levels of preparation for the new lessons to be learned.

This characteristic American difficulty, caused by curricular incoherence, is exacerbated by the swarm of students who move from school to school even within the year. In our major cities, the within-year mobility rate of students (usually the neediest students) is around 30 percent. Over time, the percentage of students who have moved more than once in grade school increases to more than 50 percent. Unless we ignore the resulting educational incoherence for this group, caused by lack of commonality in the curriculum, we must not take

the individual, local school as the unit for making educational policy, as Sizer wishes to do. Since most mobility occurs within a district, what Sizer says about the local school should be expanded at least to the local district, in which case, in order to achieve a minimum of commonality across the district, he would need to make some specific curricular decisions.

Everyone agrees that results count, yet Sizer does not want to apply a common measure for school results. He advocates “regular state inspection,” but is silent about how inspectors could reliably or fairly evaluate schools without standards of judgment based on common criteria that would not vary wildly from inspector to inspector. And I don't grasp how there could be common standards for inspectors without basing them on common standards for student outcomes. Commonality is not uniformity. Ravitch would hardly disagree with Sizer that there are many acceptable ways for schools and students to meet academic standards, once we know with some definiteness what they are.

The need for a degree of curricular commonality is so elemental and logical as to be self-evident. It has been recognized by most of the liberal democracies, including now even Great Britain. Yet this elemental logic is resisted by American experts like Sizer and Gardner, despite the current shortcomings of our public education, and despite the evident fact that their proposals would perpetuate this lack of curricular commonality without compensating for its mind-wasting unfairness. Given the popularity of their views in the education world, more than mere logic is needed to persuade parents and schools to move toward greater commonality.

Recently I have felt that what is needed to moderate the anticcommonality at-

Not to worry?

titude is an understanding of the very American emotion behind it. It is a quasireligious emotion that values diversity above commonality (“one law for lion and ox is oppression” said Blake the romantic) and that has faith in the self-adjusting power of natural processes, including educational processes, when they are left alone. Thus, when Ravitch is alarmed by the poor quality of textbooks, Gardner says that “he can’t share Ravitch’s alarm.” Why not? Because, he says, “excesses breed reactions, and I am confident that bland textbooks will generate ones that stand out.”

Blake said it memorably: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.” But why was Blake (and now Gardner) so confident that excess would lead to a beneficent result rather than merely more excess? M. H. Abrams, the expert on romanticism, had a phrase for this quasireligious faith in the beneficence of processes when left alone: he called it “natural supernaturalism.” In essence, it is a secular version of the belief in a providential divinity. First it was “God will provide.” Then it was “Nature will

provide,” and now it’s “A free society will provide.” That pattern of thought is everywhere in our culture, in free-market romanticism, in free-culture romanticism, and, emphatically, in educational romanticism. The hallmark of such thinking is an Olympian unwillingness to interfere with the untrammelled process, because to do so would artificially interfere with that which, if left alone, would lead to the palace of wisdom.

This romanticism underlying so much American educational thought would be merely a curiosity of American intellectual history were it not for the practical fact that these ideas are not just empirically wrong but also pernicious in their social and economic effects. The only way in which a complacent educational romanticism could be justified would be if it viewed antiromantic activists like Diane Ravitch as part of the benign, self-correcting process in which it places such unwarranted faith. After all, an intellectually consistent romantic would not write in opposition to Diane Ravitch but would allow the providential process to unfold by getting out of her way.

Andrew Delbanco

It all comes down to the teachers

Diane Ravitch takes us on a discouraging tour of the “Empire of Boredom” – an imaginary world created and ruled by censors and marketeers, where young people conquer all obstacles and old people are as vigorous and cheery as the cover models in *Modern Maturity* magazine. It’s unreasonable, as Ravitch says, to expect children to be interested in such a world. The literary genre best suited to represent it seems to be the textbook, which, according to Ravitch, is assembled nowadays with so much tact and caution that the result is unrelieved banality. No wonder that, rather than take school seriously, most children prefer to watch *Temptation Island*, where envy and desire are up front all the time.

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I have to take Ravitch’s word for it that “the range of forbidden knowledge seems just to keep growing” among textbook publishers and those empowered to evaluate their products. My own son and daughter are past high school, and, while they were going through those bumpy years, they were fortunate not to have had many textbooks inflicted on them. Textbooks, I suspect, have never been a good basis for teaching and learning; they have always been either tentative (*America Revised*, by Frances FitzGerald, gives a good account of the history of American history textbooks) or – to use Theodore Sizer’s terms – “compendious” and “mushy.” Textbooks are by nature reductive. They thin out the complexities of history into filaments strung between Cause A and Effect B. The only textbook I have ever read that is written with tension and urgency is William James’s *Principles of Psychology* – but the truth is, I have not read very many.

I realize that saying this may make me sound snobbish or insouciant about the practical problems of the public school classroom, where teachers may not have the knowledge, or students the skills, to approach the past through primary documents or interpretive books. In the “elite” private university where I teach, I

see relatively few casualties of the mind-numbing system Ravitch describes, and my own childhood was spent mainly in a private school where textbooks and tests were a minor part of the experience. I cannot assess the realities of a world that I know mainly from second-hand accounts by educational reformers and from a few first-hand memoirs by teachers and students. And I certainly do not mean to suggest that curricular choices of the sort Ravitch describes do not make a difference, or that state-mandated testing standards cannot provide useful incentives for public schools to serve students better. Nor am I competent to assess Sizer's sly suggestion that Ravitch's essay confirms (unwittingly) the bad effects of "centralized state and national control of the schools' curriculum." My best guess is that sometimes state intervention helps and sometimes it hurts, and that Ravitch is right that "those hardest hit by the conditions I have described are the sons and daughters of parents who lack the means to send their children to outstanding suburban schools or to private schools."

In short, Ravitch's indictment of current editorial and curricular norms in K-12 education seems mostly right – but also unsurprising. I appreciate her indignation that more schoolchildren are not given the opportunity to encounter great literature. I share her dismay at the prestige of "groupness." I recognize the vapidness of the pseudo-theoretical generalizations that students, largely ignorant of history, are expected to recite in essays and on exams.

And yet – perhaps this will sound odd coming from someone who has recently published a book celebrating the American classics – I don't quite share her outrage at the banishment of the eminent authors she mentions. In fact, I find myself wondering, with Howard Gard-

ner, whether it is really "necessary for young Americans . . . to have read certain key texts in the humanities" in order to become educated. It's useful to recall that authors we now deem classic (Ravitch names Melville, Dickens, Emerson, and Jack London), were once regarded as interlopers for whose sake the true (Greek and Latin) classics had been shunted aside. Melville, after all, was considered an obscene and half-mad writer in his own time and for a considerable time thereafter. Before Edmund Wilson revamped him as a brooding proto-modern genius, Dickens was regarded by many critics as a vulgar sentimentalist; and Jack London found favor in the Soviet Union because of his socialist sympathies and putatively proletarian sensibility. As for Emerson, he has been regarded by estimable critics as suffering from the same poverty of imagination that Ravitch attributes to the authors of dull textbooks: Yvor Winters once described Emerson's universe as a habitation fit only for "amiable imbeciles."

The fact is that arbiters of these matters have never agreed – and will never agree – on which are the "right" books. Of course I believe, with Ravitch, that it is foolish and self-defeating to shield children from the presence of suffering and injustice throughout history, and that literature helps us confront these realities. Nonetheless, I wonder if her emphasis on the content – or contentlessness – of today's curriculum does not miss the main point with which we ought to be concerned.

The main point is captured by Theodore Sizer when he says, "in reality it all comes down to the teachers." At every stage of my own life, my education was affected most directly by a teacher.

Many kinds of readings can be turned to good use by a good teacher, who has the power to awaken students to their

own distinctiveness by putting them in contact with a world different from their own. The aim of liberal education ought to be, in the nice phrase that Ravitch quotes from William Torrey Harris, “self-alienation” – distancing oneself, that is, from one’s inherited assumptions by waking up to the fact that other human beings, past and present, experience the world differently from the way we do.

In teaching Jane Austen in the core curriculum at Columbia College, for example, I found that this experience of self-alienation is not easily achieved even by students who have benefited from good fortune and been selected for high aptitude. In trying to get a fruitful discussion going about *Pride and Prejudice* in what might be called our post-marital culture, I realized that many of my students regarded Jane Austen’s preoccupation with courtship and marriage as some kind of eccentric or outmoded prudery. My job was to help them see, through Austen’s eyes, how young women in the emerging middle-class society of late eighteenth-century Britain had to reconcile their yearnings for self-fulfillment with family and class obligations from which there was no escape.

“Self-alienation” does not require a prescribed reading list, and is not likely, in my view, to be much advanced by any textbook. But it can be helped along by a teacher who responds to stirrings of imagination in the best students and provokes lesser students to begin to think. The aim of such a teacher is to help students engage with the past – an aim that can be achieved through art, music, or any number of books. In other words, the perennial challenge in humanistic teaching and learning is to grasp the pastness of the past – or, as some literary theorists like to say, its “alterity.”

This objective, I think, is often missed in our schools and, for that matter, in our colleges and universities – and I don’t think standards or tests or better textbooks are going to restore our ability to attain it. Howard Gardner rightly says that “one can learn to think historically” by studying either Thomas Jefferson or the Ming dynasty. Neither task is easy. In the latter case, the cultural distance is stark and large, and so the difficulty of thinking historically about Ming politics and aesthetics – especially given the linguistic obstacles – can be overwhelming. In the former case, the challenge may seem smaller because of our relative proximity to Jefferson as a “founding father” of our own nation. But the difficulties in thinking about Jefferson are equally daunting because the point is neither to enshrine him as the author of the Declaration of Independence nor to pillory him as an apologist for slavery. The point is to understand how a man of his intelligence and learning could combine in one cultivated mind the advocacy of human rights and the defense of slavery. If we can help our students actually to enter Jefferson’s mind by feeling the force of the ideas and attitudes he drew from his own culture, we will have gotten them started on “thinking historically.” As a teacher, I must and do believe that thinking about the past is at least a partial antidote to smugness in and about the present.

Thinking is hard work – and inciting thinking in someone else may be even harder. Only well educated, well compensated, and well respected teachers can possibly do it. Sizer’s list of the requisite minimal conditions seems about right: “Respect. A fair wage. Appropriate conditions for work. Authority.”

Among the rewarding experiences of my own professional life was the time I spent some years ago leading a seminar

*It all comes
down to the
teachers*

sponsored by the National Humanities Center for a group of teachers from a nearby North Carolina public high school.¹ The aim was to give these teachers a chance to recover the intellectual and moral passion they had originally felt for their calling – to treat them not as functionaries of a bureaucratic system that besieges them with training sessions and “enrichment” protocols, but to treat them as mentors, pastors, and, most of all, as thinking citizens. Since then, through the education initiatives that supplement its residential fellowship program, the National Humanities Center has continued to bring humanist scholars into the classroom with high

¹ I described this experience in a short article entitled “Converting Life into Truth: Seminars for High School Teachers,” *Ideas: Journal of the National Humanities Center* 4 (2) (1996): 59–62.

school teachers – on the premise that they deserve attention and respect from those of us lucky enough to make our living in institutions of higher learning.

Other private and public organizations, including the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, have mounted similar efforts. I hope that the presidents and deans of our colleges and universities will recognize the crisis of morale in K-12 education and will find ways to encourage their faculty members to work with front-line teachers, who are our best defense against the threats Ravitch describes. In pointing out that the problems she identifies are not novel but chronic, Sizer and Gardner give us all the more reason to decry and assail them.

David E. Bloom & Joel E. Cohen

Education for all: an unfinished revolution

We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build the youth for our future.

– Franklin D. Roosevelt

Societies throughout history have acknowledged the importance of education to human progress. From ancient Egypt's Books of Instruction to ancient

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Greece's Academy, from early Quranic schools to the modern Western world, civilizations have attempted to ensure their prosperity by educating their youth. Smaller societies, too, from villages in Yemen to dwellers in the African bush, have invested time and resources in education for similar reasons.

Universal education has been on the global agenda since the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed free and compulsory education to be a basic human right. The 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by all but two of the world's governments, reaffirmed this right as a legally binding obligation. Since then, there have been many high-level international commitments to education for all.¹ Several scholars have also envisioned broadening its reach. But none of these international declarations has sufficed to translate right into reality. None of these scholarly reports takes on the linkage of basic and secondary education with other parts of the education system and with other sectors. None gives a balanced consideration of all

¹ Just this year, the World Bank announced a new effort to ensure that all children would receive an elementary education. At the same time, officials acknowledged that they would probably not reach this goal by the target date of 2015.

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modalities of education (in addition to the classical schoolroom). None identifies workable solutions to the economic, political, and cultural obstacles to achieving universal basic and secondary education. Finally, none of these international declarations endeavors to document in detail the globally transformative effects that would follow from educating well all the world's children with the equivalent of today's primary and secondary education.

There is ample room, then, for further inquiry and discussion oriented toward action at the global, national, and community levels. It cannot be taken for granted that the educational models and methods of today's industrial countries will be appropriate and feasible to bring education of high quality to all children in the rest of the world.

In recent decades, progress toward universal education has been unprecedented. Illiteracy in the developing world has fallen from 75 percent of people a century ago to less than 25 percent today. The average number of years spent in school in developing countries more than doubled between 1965 and 1990, from 2.1 to 4.4, among those age twenty-five and over.²

However, while the number of people with access to some schooling has increased, improvements at the secondary level have been patchy. Whether the lack of progress is due to a lack of political will, a lack of resources, bad implemen-

tation of good ideas, or other factors, separately or in combination, is unclear. Acknowledging past failures and finding out what went wrong, as well as finding the reasons for progress where progress occurred, are crucial to future success.

At the same time, improvements in the quality of primary education have also been less than impressive. In many areas, official statistics disguise fundamental flaws and exaggerate the progress made. Largely focused on enrollment and literacy, the data reveal little about the quality of education. (Even the concept of the "quality of education" is problematic, likely to be culturally dependent, and in need of further analysis and operational definition.)

Rote learning is the norm in many developing-country schools, and a lack of well-qualified teachers means that many children receive only the rudiments of an education. Many others whose attendance at school does not endure much beyond registration day miss even that. Of the 1993 cohort that entered primary school in developing countries, nearly one-fourth failed to reach the fifth grade.

Enrollment data also camouflage absenteeism and grade repetition. In inefficient educational systems, many students repeat years of schooling. In Brazil, for example, 26 percent of primary and 20 percent of lower secondary school students repeated their grades in 1997. On average, Brazilian students repeat over two years of classes, which accounts for a significant amount of the total years spent in school.³

Even with 4.4 years of education, the developing world lags far behind the industrialized countries, where the corresponding figure is 9.4 years. Over 45 per-

2 UNESCO, *Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy*, 1990 ed. (Paris: UNESCO Office of Statistics, 1990); Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, "International measures of schooling years and schooling quality," *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings* 86 (2) (1996): 218–223; Task Force on Higher Education and Society, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000).

3 UNESCO/OECD World Indicators Programme, *Investing in Education: Analysis of the 1999 World Education Indicators* (Paris: OECD, 2000).

cent of adults in the world's least developed countries, moreover, are illiterate, and gender differences are wide.⁴ In low-income developing countries, according to World Bank figures for 1999, 19 percent of males and 31 percent of females aged fifteen to twenty-four years were illiterate.⁵

The authors of this essay are part of a collective effort to develop and implement a detailed program to make more progress in educating *all* of the world's children. We believe it is possible and desirable for all children to receive high-quality primary and secondary schooling, through ten or a dozen years of education, whether in traditional or nontraditional settings. In what follows, we will describe the background of our effort, and the steps underway to convert our vision into a workable plan – and a working reality.

In 1990, a World Conference on 'Education for All' was held at Jomtien, Thailand. The 155 countries represented at this conference jointly pledged to provide primary education for all by the year 2000, and to ensure that children and adults would "benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs."

Progress toward meeting these goals was reviewed ten years later at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Much had been achieved: for example, some countries have come close to achieving universal primary education since Jomtien. Much more remains to be done, however. The net enrollment ratio for primary education (that is, the number of pupils in the official school-age group as a percentage of the total popu-

lation in that age group) in sub-Saharan Africa rose from 54 percent in 1990 to 60 percent in 1998, and in southern and western Asia it rose from 67 percent to 74 percent over the same period.⁶ At this slow rate of progress, sub-Saharan Africa would require another half century, and southern and western Asia another quarter century, to obtain 97.5 percent net primary enrollment. Such progress is simply too slow. Parts of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa continue to lag behind. One hundred and thirteen million primary school-age children remained out of school as of early 2000, and the quality of educational delivery and responsiveness to student need remained patchy.

Enrollment ratios still vary widely by gender. For example, in 1998 the net enrollment ratio for primary education in sub-Saharan Africa was 66 percent for males, but only 54 percent for females; in the Middle East and North Africa, it was 80 percent for males and 71 percent for females; and in southern and western Asia, 79 percent for males and 67 percent for females. For the world as a whole, including developed countries, the primary net enrollment ratio was 87 percent for boys and 80 percent for girls.⁷

Demographic trends mean that developing world educational systems are likely to come under increasing pressure. While 1998 UN Population Division projections foresee few dramatic changes to the global school-age population over the next half-century as a whole, they project large increases in the countries that can least afford it.

The growing population of primary school-age children, in conjunction with raising primary school enrollment rates

4 UNESCO, *World Education Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 2000).

5 World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2001* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2001).

6 UNESCO, *Education for All 2000 Assessment Statistical Document*, 29, 33

7 Ibid.

to 100 percent throughout the developing world, would result in approximately 15 percent more primary students by 2015 than in 1995. However, a much larger problem in achieving universal education will be in secondary schools. In 1997, secondary school enrollment in developing countries stood at 281 million, with another 264 million not enrolled.⁸ The population of ten- to fourteen-year-olds – the age range for which data are easily available, and which approximates the secondary school years – will grow by 65 million from 1995 to 2015.⁹ Thus, full secondary school enrollment will require the enrollment of over 300 million more students in 2015 than in 1995.

By far the greatest increases will be needed in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the two regions with the lowest current enrollment rates. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 26 percent of children are enrolled at the secondary level – an increase of just 4 percentage points since Jomtien in 1990. In South Asia, although secondary gross enrollment rates have risen sharply since 1970, at 45 percent they remain well behind the global average. In the least developed countries overall, at most 19 percent of children attend secondary school.¹⁰

The Dakar Framework for Action that emerged from the World Education Forum simultaneously renewed the inter-

national community's commitments and implicitly acknowledged its inability to achieve its stated goals, extending the deadline to 2015.¹¹

New thinking on designing and implementing a high quality education for all the world's children is clearly needed. In today's knowledge economy, primary education, while essential, is not enough. In the developing world, secondary schools, colleges, and universities have yet to reach large numbers of potential students. Low standards are a persistent problem in many areas where poverty is endemic.

Policymakers are now coming to acknowledge these failings more fully. 'Education for All' has not been achieved. We need new ideas, new strategies, and new efforts if the goals laid out at Jomtien, and our more ambitious goals, are to be realized.

The case for providing an 'Education for All' can be made on four different grounds: humanitarian, sociological, political, and economic.

The humanitarian case is straightforward: Education enables human beings to develop their capacities so that they can lead fulfilling and dignified lives. Promoting equality of opportunity through education can be a powerful response to those who believe that the recent process of globalization has increased inequality and further marginal-

8 UNESCO online database.

9 United Nations, *World Population Prospects*, 2000 rev.

10 Each of these figures is a gross enrollment rate – that is, the ratio of the number of students enrolled in secondary school to the number of children in the population who are in the age group normally expected to be enrolled in secondary school. Children counted in the numerator may be older than the normal ages for secondary school because they started school late or because they had to repeat one or more years of schooling. A gross enrollment

rate, therefore, may exaggerate or overstate the fraction of children of secondary school age who are enrolled in secondary school. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Gross enrollment ratios by level of education," 2001; available at <<http://www.uis.unesco.org/en/stats/statso.htm>>.

11 UNESCO, "Education for All," 2001; available at <http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/index.shtml>.

ized the poor. Education of high quality helps people give meaning to their lives by placing them in the context of human and natural history and by creating awareness of other cultures. (We address below the formidable task of specifying what we mean by “education of high quality” when we sketch some preliminary thoughts about the goals of education.)

A second justification for basic and secondary education is sociological. Social and cultural capital, which are crucial ingredients in the development process and ones that enhance the operation of other development channels, can be greatly strengthened by education. Schools can help foster a sense of community. A good education empowers people to take responsibility for their own lives and for improving the lives of those around them. The Jomtien Declaration highlights the importance of education to furthering the cause of social justice, human rights, and social and religious tolerance – all vital to ensuring international peace and promoting sustainable human development.

A third justification for universal education is political. Education is popular among voters. It can also, as Francis Fukuyama has argued, “create the conditions necessary for democratic society.”¹² “It is hard to imagine,” he continues, “democracy working properly in a largely illiterate society where the people cannot take advantage of information about the choices open to them.” Both domestic and international political stability, too, are affected by education or its absence. Dictators, for example, who can have serious destabilizing impacts on their regions, often endure because the limited educational level of their

12 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 116.

subjects makes it more difficult for a populace to mobilize against them.¹³ At the level of international politics, education has an important contribution to make to global peace and stability, as modern technology makes it possible for the problems caused by poor education anywhere to affect other countries everywhere.

A fourth and perhaps most persuasive argument for universal education is economic. For over two hundred years economists have been struggling to answer one simple but fundamental question: Why are the people of some countries richer than others? Why did Australia surge ahead of Argentina? Why are the Asian Tigers so far ahead of South Asia? A classic answer has been that some countries have more natural resources and physical capital and better technology than others, and that these advantages allow them to create greater income and wealth. But the truth seems to be more complex. Beginning in the late 1950s, economists expanded the notion of capital to include human capital as well. Education, or investment in people’s capacities, raises people’s productivity and provides a foundation for rapid technological change. Each year of schooling in developing countries is thought to raise people’s earning power by over 10 percent.¹⁴

Education can also operate indirectly by promoting good health and a demographic transition from high fertility and high mortality to low fertility and low

13 We recognize, of course, that a well-educated population is not a guaranteed barrier to the power of dictators. The most notable exception is that of Nazi Germany.

14 Gene Sperling, “Educating the World,” *New York Times*, 22 November 2001; George Psacharopoulos, “A reply to Bennell,” *World Development* 24 (1996): 201.

mortality. The spread of schooling increases possibilities for the growth of national income, and that additional income helps to finance additional education, which leads to more income, in a virtuous spiral.¹⁵

Amartya Sen has shown how the economic success of Japan in the last 150 years was driven by its focus on expanding education before economic development was underway. The contrasting fortunes of China and India in moving toward an open, market-oriented economy further support the importance of education. India's "massive negligence of school education," Sen argues, meant that the country was ill-prepared for economic expansion. The spectacular success of China's economy, on the other hand, since it began to open markets in 1979 was built on a highly literate population produced by a strong basic education system, which attempted to include all girls as well as all boys.¹⁶

The economic argument, however, is not, by itself, sufficient. Well-educated populations in the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the Indian state of Kerala, for example, have failed to build strong economies. There are limits to what education can achieve when its effects are neutralized by other obstacles to development. Some of the Gulf states, whose growth has been founded on oil rather than education, show that universal education is not even necessary for economic growth.

15 David Bloom and David Canning, "Cumulative Causality, Economic Growth, and the Demographic Transition," in Nancy Birdsall, Allen C. Kelley, and Steven W. Sinding, eds., *Population Matters: Demographic Change, Economic Growth, and Poverty in the Developing World* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 165–197.

16 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 42–43.

Indeed, the case for universal education must rest finally on the best available empirical evidence for *all* of its possible benefits – humanitarian, sociological, political, *and* economic.

Those who promote the benefits of education must demonstrate that education is an essential component on the path to greater quality of life in the future if they wish to convince political leaders and their constituencies to take meaningful action. The arguments for education as an essential complement to other factors of development and to other factors of national interest must be analyzed, the likely cost of progress measured, and the practical actions agreed on, while taking into account the lessons learned from previous successes and failures.

The field of international development is littered with apparently good ideas that failed to deliver their promised benefits. The failures to achieve universal basic and secondary education have many causes.

Economists have long argued that education should be a policy priority for developing countries, but many governments have so far done little to raise educational attainment beyond increasing primary enrollment rates. Some of the obstacles are material: a lack of funds and inadequate infrastructure. Some obstacles derive from limited local capacity to change. But among the greatest problems is lack of political will for an initiative whose benefits will accrue substantially to nonelites and remain invisible until far into the future.

Developing countries spend around \$240 billion a year of public money on primary and secondary education.¹⁷ As

17 Authors' calculations based on data from Task Force on Higher Education, *Higher Education in Developing Countries*.

there are approximately one billion children aged six to sixteen in developing countries, the average expenditure is about \$240 per child per year – less than 10 percent of the comparable figure for high-income countries.

How much additional funding is really required is not obvious from these figures because some countries are apparently able to educate children very well at relatively low cost. For example, Cuba spends below \$1,000 of public money per primary school student per year, less than most other nations of the Western Hemisphere. Yet Cuba's primary school students rank far higher in terms of standardized test scores than those of any other country in the Latin American region.¹⁸ More generally, there is much to learn from studying success stories of both countries and regions within countries.

Another view of the financial obstacles to the spread of education is given by estimates of what it would cost to put every child in quality primary education by 2015. Gene Sperling quotes recent UNICEF estimates of \$7 billion and \$9.1 billion per year and an Oxfam estimate of \$8 billion additionally annually.¹⁹ On their face these cost estimates seem implausibly low, especially in comparison with amounts that are currently being spent.²⁰ A recent World Bank Working

18 Christopher Marquis, "Cuba Leads Latin America in Primary Education, Study Finds," *New York Times*, 14 December 2001, A22; Task Force on Education, Equity, and Economic Competitiveness in Latin America & the Caribbean, *Lagging Behind: A Report Card on Education in Latin America* (Washington, D.C.: Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas, Inter-American Dialogue, November 2001).

19 Gene Sperling, "Toward Universal Education: Making a Promise and Keeping It," *Foreign Affairs* 80 (5) (September/October 2001): 7–13.

20 If we divide these estimates by the estimated number of children of primary school age who

Paper has given a higher estimate of \$10–15 billion per year.²¹ This is not a trivial magnitude, but even it surely pales in comparison to the full costs of not educating these children. In any case, more data and analysis are sorely needed here.

Rising enrollment figures are likely to magnify the strain on government budgets. The strain may be moderated insofar as there are some natural economies of scale in the provision of education (development of educational materials and tools for educational management, for example). On the other hand, it may be magnified as a result of the need to recruit larger numbers of qualified teachers.

While a lack of funding has undoubtedly been a problem in some countries, the fact remains that even where good schools are available, many children do not attend them. The opportunity cost of attending school is particularly significant in poor areas, because sending a child to school prevents him or her from making an economic contribution to the family. Out-of-pocket costs such as for school fees, uniforms, or textbooks may also be beyond the reach of many poor families. Even if the labor market offers reasonable rates of return on investments in schooling, families may decline to undertake the investments insofar as education promotes migration (urban and international), the benefits of which do not necessarily accrue to the family left behind.

were not in primary school in 1998, namely, 113 million (UNESCO, *Education for All 2000 Assessment Statistical Document*, 9), we get a cost of \$62 to \$81 per child per year.

21 Shantayanan Devarajan, Margaret J. Miller, and Eric V. Swanson, "Goals for Development: History, Prospects, and Costs," *World Bank Working Paper* 2819 (April 2002): 16, 22–26.

Gender inequality can also depress enrollment rates. In many of the poorest areas of the world, girls do not receive the same education as boys. Parental concerns about the personal and sexual security of their daughters may make them reluctant to send daughters to schools away from home, to classrooms without female teachers, or to schools without latrines separated by sex. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 69 percent of girls enroll in primary school, compared to 84 percent of boys.²²

Promotion of female education has strong potential to trigger virtuous development spirals. Educated girls generally have fewer children, so that educating one generation of girls makes it easier to educate the next. The children of educated mothers generally enjoy healthier lives than those of less educated mothers, and hence are better able to learn. They also have lower mortality, so they are better investments for the educational system.

In addition, education directly improves the quality of life and the economic potential of the educated girl herself. Increasing the number of female teachers, expanding schools so that sexes may be separated where that is deemed culturally desirable, and working to eliminate gender discrimination in the labor market can all help to cut gender bias and increase enrollment rates further.

The poor quality of education is another major factor behind low enrollment statistics. Obsolete curricula, a lack of educational materials, inadequate classrooms, and poor teacher quality all reduce the incentive for children to attend school.

In many areas, moreover, the drive to increase enrollment rates has had a det-

perimental effect on educational quality. In such areas, the number of teachers has not kept pace with the number of students, and student-teacher ratios have risen as a result. A study in Tamil Nadu, India, for example, found that while the number of children enrolled in primary and lower secondary school increased by 35 percent from 1977 to 1992, the number of teachers rose by only 4 percent.²³ A falling ratio of students to teachers is no guarantee of rising educational quality, as Argentina appears to have discovered, but the trend in Tamil Nadu goes in the wrong direction. Improved access to education may therefore become a threat to quality.

Higher enrollment rates do not lead to greater knowledge or skills if teaching quality is low. Low salaries and poor teacher training mean that highly skilled, motivated people are unlikely to be attracted to a teaching career. Large class sizes also tend to be a further deterrent to potential educators. Moreover, those who are attracted, if they are not judged and rewarded on the basis of their results, often have little incentive beyond normal worker's pride to improve their methods.

Effective reform requires more than articulating a sensible new vision for basic and secondary education. It requires appreciating the different goals of education in different cultures, and it requires developing the human and technological means necessary to achieve those goals. It requires a thorough quantitative assessment of present educational performance and a rigorous

23 P. Duraisamy, Estelle James, Julia Lane, and Jee-Peng Tan, "Is there a Quantity-Quality Tradeoff as Enrollments Increase? Evidence from Tamil Nadu, India," *Policy Research Working Paper* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1997).

22 UNESCO/OECD, *Investing in Education*.

projection of the expected consequences of future improvements. It also requires the mobilization of political will, building a broad-based consensus in favor of key reforms.

Governments, ministries of education, teachers, and parents all need to be enlisted in a renewed drive for universal education. These traditional agents of education will benefit from nontraditional partnerships with other government ministries, such as ministries of labor and of commerce, along with local, national, and multinational businesses – in short, with all parties that have a stake in a capable populace. An effective strategy requires an appreciation of national needs and concerns outside of basic and secondary education. It requires an objective account of each country's financial, human, and political resources. It requires sensitivity to each country's history and cultures to ensure the workability and legitimacy of the institutions that have to be built as part of the reform.

If governments and teachers are to be brought on board, the beneficial consequences of achieving universal primary and secondary education will have to be spelled out and, ideally, supported by credible data. An evidence-based strategy needs to identify the mechanisms through which education enhances the quality of life by promoting health, human dignity, and economic growth.

For example, education may affect a population in a variety of ways: by cultivating skills and disseminating knowledge; by raising social status; by increasing earnings in the labor market; by lowering fertility rates; by enhancing the sense of personal autonomy; by broadening cultural horizons.²⁴

24 National Research Council, *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999).

If knowledge and skills acquired in schools are the main avenue of influence on demography, then curricular content is crucial. If, on the other hand, contact with a culture outside the home, or potential earnings and the opportunity costs of high fertility are the main avenues of influence, then the content of the curriculum may not be so crucial. This is one reason why careful research is critical to the formulation of policy.

Cross-national comparisons and research into the effect of education on foreign direct investment, international competitiveness, inequality, and poverty will be instructive for policymakers and educators alike. Because considerable research on these topics has already been carried out, new efforts should build on what is already known and clarify areas of uncertainty.

Of course, not every regime will welcome every likely consequence of providing an 'Education for All.' Marshaling the evidence that education changes the aspirations of women, brings down fertility rates, and promotes a demographic transition (by, for example, increasing age at first marriage, age at first birth, use of family-planning services, and encouraging parents to invest more time and money in fewer children) will act as a spur to some governments – and perhaps as a deterrent to others.

In addition, governments may react in varied ways if there is reason to think that money spent on universal education detracts from the achievement of potentially competing social goals, such as improved health.

Still, if it can be demonstrated empirically that universal education is finally in the interest of every society, then most governments are eventually liable to join in the effort. And if businesses, too, can be persuaded that universal education is a public good, then they too may be will-

ing to bring their innovation and creativity to the table, and perhaps even some money.

One of the most sensitive issues in any effort to promote universal basic and secondary education is the definition of goals. Goals must be clearly laid out so that the success of programs can be continuously monitored. At the local level, those who will be most affected by locally adopted goals should not be excluded from the tasks of adapting educational goals to local knowledge and aspirations. To stimulate thinking and provoke discussion about possible shared goals, we offer the following suggestions:

- The skills taught should include reading with understanding, writing with clarity, and speaking with confidence. (The choice of language or languages in which these skills are practiced is likely to be a national or local issue.) The skills taught should also include numeracy, that is, the ability to read and understand the kinds of quantitative information encountered in daily life, plus the ability to compute as required in the contexts of daily life. (These fundamental skills with words and numbers are to be distinguished from the specialized disciplinary skills of literary and mathematical analysis.) Additional skills worthy of attention include peaceful ways to manage and resolve, where possible, conflicts and differences within and between a variety of cultural units. The conflicts and the means of resolving them will differ culturally (e.g. compromise vs. consensual discussion vs. majority vote vs. appeal to tradition) but the skills of dealing peacefully with conflict may have widespread or universal value. Other important skills include the ability to analyze and make choices about personal life and work, and the

ability to be productive and find satisfaction in personal life and work.

*Education
for all*

- The knowledge to be imparted must focus on both the self and others. In human terms, others might include the family, the local community, other communities and cities, the nation-state (if relevant), other countries and cultures, and humankind. In nonhuman terms, others might include other living species and the major nonliving components of the Earth. "Other" will also refer to other times, including the sources and limitations of our understanding of past and future. These domains of knowledge can be approached through the perspectives of the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities. For example, understanding the self in scientific perspective provides a vehicle for instruction in health and human biology and behavior.
- The attitudes to be instilled must also refer both to the self and to others – though here the goals of a universal education are liable to provoke controversy. How will schools balance the values of individuality and of collective concern, of innovation and conformity, of initiative and obedience, of competitiveness and cooperation, of skepticism and respect? The industrial model of classroom education, with students sitting silently and obediently at desks arranged on a grid and listening to an authoritative teacher, with classes starting promptly when the bell rings, conveys a different set of values and attitudes than many alternative modes of education.

The goals of education for children around the world will shape the kinds of people we and our children will live among. More is at stake in defining and assuring a quality education for every

child than defeating terrorism, or lowering population growth rates, or expanding world economic growth, or spreading democracy and the rule of law – though all of these in our view are worthwhile consequences. Also at stake are the inventiveness and civility of the people among whom we will live, and the richness of our own opportunities to learn from them.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences is currently assembling a task force to examine the rationale, means, and consequences of providing a quality education to all the world's children at the primary and secondary levels. The project aims to synthesize what is known about many of the issues raised above, and also to identify what needs to be known, in order to formulate policy options for moving forward.

The Academy project has six features that, in combination, set it apart from previous efforts to promote universal education.

First, instead of taking the value of universal education as self-evident, the project will be analytical. It will attempt to document in detail who benefits and to what extent and how. Thus the value of education is taken as a hypothesis to be evaluated, not as an axiom.

Second, the project will be cross-sectoral in orientation, attempting to evaluate the interactions of education with competing and complementary contributors to human well-being, such as public health (including family planning and reproductive health), jobs, nutrition, and physical infrastructure.

Third, the project will be cross-sectoral in expertise. It will encourage fresh perspectives from economists, developmental psychologists, demographers, statisticians, historians, cultural anthropologists, medical and public-health workers, and others to complement the

expertise of those who already work in education.

Fourth, the project will consider education by all means, including but not limited to enrollment in primary and secondary school.

Fifth, the project will explore the view that the goal of *primary* education for all is not ambitious enough. The project will extend this goal through *secondary* education.

Sixth, the project will take into account the interactions of universal and local criteria for what constitutes education of high quality.

Ideas for means of reaching children to educate them will benefit from drawing on successful efforts to change large, complex systems in other fields. Educational programs may benefit from experience with successful delivery methods in national and international efforts in, for example, agriculture and public health.

The project will examine whether and how new technologies can be harnessed to promote a more effective and equitable distribution of education. It will also evaluate teacher development efforts where education is to be delivered by teachers.

These large goals will eventually have to give way to specifics, such as 'Where will the implementation of the plans developed by the first phase of the project start?' 'Who should be involved?' 'Where will the money come from?' 'How can students study at night in villages with no electricity?' 'How are poor families going to be persuaded to let their children study instead of work?' Delivery methods will inevitably need to be judged on their economic viability as well as by their human and political advantages.

The research is not intended to compare formally universal basic and secondary education to other instruments

of development. It is not trying to model rigorously the whole development process. It is meant to take a critical look at previous thinking in the field and assess both the desirability and the feasibility of a global effort to involve governments, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, families, and individuals in the drive for primary and secondary education for all.

The Academy's scholarly analysis and dissemination of research results will complement other efforts under way to develop support for universal education at the level of grass-roots organizations and at the level of national and international political leadership (for example, the Global Alliance on Basic Education proposed by Gene Sperling²⁵).

We hope that the Academy's research will support and improve the policies advocated by other groups, while receiving

stimulation from the practical questions they raise. A coordinated approach to global educational development that combines analytical research with popular and political advocacy seems more likely to be effective than advocacy without research – or research conducted without effective advocacy.²⁶

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25 Sperling, "Toward Universal Education," 7–13.