

Creating a Curriculum for the American People

Our Democracy Depends on Shared Knowledge



BY E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

I was wrenched from my comfortable life as a conference-going literary theorist almost four decades ago. I was doing experiments on reading and writing, first with students at the University of Virginia and then with students at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, a predominantly African American institution in Richmond. What shocked me into school reform was the discovery that the community college students could comprehend written text just as well as the University of Virginia students when the topic was roommates or car traffic, but they could not understand passages

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about Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. They had graduated from the schools of Richmond, the erstwhile capital of the Confederacy, and were ignorant of the most elementary facts of the Civil War and other basic information normally taken for granted in the United States. They had not been taught the things they needed to know to understand texts addressed to a general audience. What had the schools been doing? I decided to switch careers and devote myself to helping right the wrong being done to these students. It soon became clear that for most students, the primary determinant of whether they ended up at the community college or at the University of Virginia was not innate ability or family background—it was knowledge. More important, it was knowledge that could be learned at school.

America's three biggest educational problems are our low academic achievement relative to other nations, our lack of equality

of educational opportunity, and our failure to perpetuate a strong sense of loyalty to the national community and its civic institutions. A single, radical reform will go far in solving all three: a content-rich core curriculum in the early grades.

A lack of knowledge, both civic and general, is the most significant deficit in most American students' education. For the most part, our students (and teachers) are bright, idealistic, well meaning, and good natured. Many students and teachers are working harder in school than their counterparts did a decade ago. Yet most students still lack basic information that high school and college teachers once took for granted. In this article, I'll explain why this lack of knowledge is even more important than most people realize and why a content-rich core curriculum is the *only* viable remedy.

Shared Knowledge Is Essential to Language Comprehension

Back in the 1970s, when I was doing research on reading and writing, the field of psycholinguistics was just beginning to emphasize that the chief factor in the comprehension of language is relevant knowledge about the topic at hand. That finding has since been replicated many times, in different ways and with varying constraints, both in the laboratory and in the classroom.

The specific knowledge dependence of reading comprehension becomes obvious when we take the time to reflect on what any given bit of text assumes the reader already knows. For a simple example, here is a passage from a sample 10th-grade Florida state test of reading comprehension:¹

The origin of cotton is something of a mystery. There is evidence that people in India and Central and South America domesticated separate species of the plant thousands of years ago. Archaeologists have discovered fragments of cotton cloth more than 4,000 years old in coastal Peru and at Mohenjo Daro in the Indus Valley. By A.D. 1500, cotton had spread across the warmer regions of the Americas, Eurasia, and Africa.

Today cotton is the world's major nonfood crop, providing half of all textiles. In 1992, 80 countries produced a total of 83 million bales, or almost 40 billion pounds. The business revenue generated—some 50 billion dollars in the United States alone—is greater than that of any other field crop.

It would take many pages to indicate even a significant fraction of the tacit knowledge needed to understand this passage. The main subject, cotton, is not defined. The reader must already know what it is, a reasonable assumption. It also helps to have an idea of how it grows, and how it is harvested and then put into bales. (What's a bale?) Then consider the throwaway statement that different people "domesticated separate species of the plant thousands of years ago." To domesticate a species of a plant is not an action that is self-evident from everyday knowledge. Ask a group of 10th-graders what it means to domesticate a plant, and chances are that most will not know. Of course, they *should* know. Domestication of plants is fundamental to human history. But I suspect most do not, and so they will not understand that part of the passage. The writer of this passage (which was, the state of Florida informs us, taken from *National Geographic*) clearly expected his readers to know what cotton is and what plant

domestication is. He expected them to know that the Indus Valley is many thousands of miles from Peru. (How many 10th-graders know *that*?)

This passage illustrates the way reading comprehension works in the real world of magazines, training manuals, textbooks, newspapers, Web sites, books, etc. Writers assume that readers know some things but not others. In this case, readers were expected to know some geography and history, and something about agriculture, but not how long human beings have used cotton—the new information supplied in the passage. That is exactly how new information is always offered: it is embedded in a mountain of knowledge that readers are expected to have already in their long-term memories. That is the way language *always* works. And it is

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the way language must work. Just imagine how cumbersome your newspaper would be if, in reporting on a baseball game, it did not assume you already knew what "pitching," "being at bat," and "hitting a home run" mean. Instead of a short synopsis of last night's game, you'd get paragraph after paragraph that (boringly) explained the basics of the game. Of course, if you didn't know anything about baseball, a short synopsis of the game wouldn't make any sense (no matter how many comprehension strategies you had mastered).

Not convinced? Give this passage on cricket, from the online site of the British newspaper the *Guardian*, a try:²

Much depended on Ponting and the new wizard of Oz, Mike Hussey, the two overnight batsmen. But this duo perished either side of lunch—the latter a little unfortunate to be adjudged leg-before—and with Andrew Symonds, too, being shown the dreaded finger off an inside edge, the inevitable beckoned, bar the pyrotechnics of Michael Clarke and the ninth wicket.

This is perfectly understandable for virtually all British readers, but at the dim edge of comprehensibility for most American readers. Yet the words are familiar enough. There is not a single word except maybe "leg-before" that I could not use effectively in a sentence. Comprehension is not just a matter of knowing words—and it is certainly not a matter of mastering comprehension strategies. What makes the passage incomprehensible to me is that I don't know much about cricket.

In language use, there is always a great deal that is left unsaid and must be inferred. This means that communication depends on both sides, writer and reader, sharing a great deal of *unspoken*

knowledge. This large body of tacit knowledge is precisely what our students are *not* being adequately taught in our schools. Specific subject-matter knowledge over a broad range of domains is the key to language comprehension—and, as a result, to a broad ability to learn new things. It is the cornerstone of competence and adaptability in the modern world. (Cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham thoroughly explained this in the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*. See “How Knowledge Helps: It Speeds and Strengthens Reading Comprehension, Learning—and Thinking,” available online at www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/index.htm.)

If we want students to read and write well, we cannot take a laissez-faire attitude to the content of their schooling. Rather, we must specify the content that adults are assumed to have (e.g., to



The phrase “common school” meant rich and poor studying in the same classrooms with a common core curriculum that would foster patriotism, solidarity, and civic peace as well as enable effective commerce, rule of law, and politics.

comprehend a newspaper or serve on a jury), and be sure to teach it to our children.

But much more is at stake in ensuring that all students have access to this knowledge than just enabling our students to make higher scores on reading comprehension tests. Those scores do correlate with a student’s ability to learn and to earn a good living,³ but they also connect with something less tangible: a sense of belonging to a wider community and a feeling of solidarity with other Americans. When we acquire enough knowledge to become full members of the American speech community, we belong to a wider group toward which we feel a sense of loyalty.

Shared Knowledge Is Essential to Democracy

When Benjamin Franklin was leaving the Constitutional Convention of 1787, a lady asked him, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a monarchy or a republic?” to which Franklin famously replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.” It’s hard for us to recapture that state of mind, but it is instructive to do so. The causes of our Founders’ concern for preserving the republic have not suddenly disappeared with the emergence of American economic and military power. We are still a nation of immigrants, social stratification, and disparate beliefs held together chiefly by a shared devotion to freedom and democracy.

Anxiety about maintaining the republic runs through the writings of all our earliest thinkers about American education. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Franklin, and their colleagues consistently alluded to the fact that republics have been among the least stable forms of government, and were always collapsing from their internal antagonisms and self-seeking citizens.

The most famous example was the republic of ancient Rome, which was taken over by the unscrupulous Caesars and destroyed by what the American founders called “factions.”⁴ Internal conflicts were seen to be the chief danger we faced—Germans against English, state against state, region against region, local interests against national interests, party against party, personal ambition against personal ambition, religion against religion, poor against rich, uneducated against educated. If uncontrolled, these hostile factions would subvert the common good, breed demagogues, and finally turn the republic into a military dictatorship, just as in ancient Rome.

To keep that from happening, we would need far more than checks and balances in the structure of the national government. We would also need a special new brand of citizens who, unlike the citizens of Rome and other failed republics, would subordinate their local interests to the common good.

Our early thinkers about education believed the only way we could create such virtuous, civic-minded citizens was through common schooling. By the phrase “common school,” our early educational thinkers meant several things: Elementary schools were to be universal and egalitarian. All children were to attend the same schools, with rich and poor studying in the same classrooms. The schools were to be supported by taxes and to have a common, statewide system of administration. And the early grades were to have a common core curriculum that would foster patriotism, solidarity, and civic peace as well as enable effective commerce, rule of law, and politics.⁵

For example, George Washington bequeathed a portion of his estate to education in order “to sprd systemactic ideas through all parts of this rising Empire, thereby to do away local attachments and State prejudices.”⁶ Thomas Jefferson’s plan for the common school aimed to secure not only the peace and safety of the republic, but also social fairness and the best leaders. He outlined a system of elementary schooling that required all children, rich and poor, to go to the same schools so that they would get an equal chance regardless of who their parents happened to be.

Such notions about the civic necessity of the common school animated American thinkers far into the 19th century and had a profound effect on Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln believed that the center of children's upbringing and schooling in the United States should be instruction in a *religious* devotion to democracy. Like the Founders from whom he took his inspiration, Lincoln was sensitive to the fragility of peace and harmony in a country where people of different religious faiths and ethnic origins bound themselves into one federation. His tragic sense of how precarious that unity is brought him very early to the view that parents and schools must diligently teach a common creed in order to sustain the union. His great Lyceum speech on that subject, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," dates to 1838—long before he became the central figure in preserving the unity of a nation riven

secular religion was the sharp distinction the Founders drew between the public and private spheres of life.⁹ We operate in the public sphere whenever we vote, serve in the military, transact business, become a member of a jury or a defendant at a jury's mercy, write for a big unseen audience, or encounter any situation where we wish to be understood by strangers. This public sphere is where common laws and a common language are needed. The private sphere is a much broader realm, especially in tolerant America with its protections against intrusive government and its freedoms of association, speech, and action. It is neither literally private nor purely individual. "Private" associations are private only in the sense of being out of the reach of government and enjoyed peacefully apart from our legal, civic, and moral duties as members of the wider public community.

According to Thomas Jefferson, an educational system that offered equality of opportunity would "avail the commonwealth of those talents and virtues which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as rich."

by the issue of slavery. The urgency conveyed in this speech came not from the single issue of slavery but more broadly from his perception of the need to put solidarity, equality, freedom, and civic peace above all other principles—a public "political religion" that transcended all sectarian religions.⁷

From the nation's founding to today, American schools have played a critical role in our attempt to accommodate different groups and ethnicities in a peaceful and harmonious unity without requiring them to abandon their private identities. The elementary school has a special place in this great political experiment because it is the institution that prepares children to participate effectively in the public sphere. Our ambition as a nation has been to give children from any and all origins a chance to participate in the public sphere as equals, no matter who their parents are, or what language or religion they practice in their homes.

Equality—both equality before the law and equality of opportunity—is not only a core American value but also a core requisite for a peaceable public sphere. In America, universal schooling has always been understood as critical to our ideal of equality. In the introduction to his 1817 bill for an Elementary School Act in Virginia, the aging Thomas Jefferson, the most consistent of the Founders in stressing the importance of public education, succinctly stated the grounds for equality of

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Lincoln conceived that America needed to be held together by a secular religion called "Democracy" that would be taught in our schools and would supersede all other religions. This religious conception was not a mere analogy or rhetorical flourish. With his accustomed profundity, he went directly from the writings of the Founders to the center of the American idea. Garry Wills has shown in his dazzling book *Lincoln at Gettysburg* how concisely Lincoln reformulated the American creed as an extension of the Declaration of Independence.⁸ In his Lyceum speech, he did no less for the basic theory of American schooling.

Fundamental to this idea of making democracy America's



opportunity. An educational system that offered it would “avail the commonwealth of those talents and virtues which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as rich.”¹⁰

The early school curriculum needs to offer enough commonality of content to connect each American with the larger community of citizens. Students need to leave school with a good understanding of the civic principles under which the United States operates and with an emotional commitment to making this political experiment continue to work. They need to possess the specific, concrete knowledge that will enable them to communicate with one another in the standard language across time

and space. That much substantial content is required for our civic life to function.

An initiation into this public sphere does *not* require students to reject the private sphere that nurtured them. Membership in this public sphere means mastery of the formal codes of speech and of the tacit knowledge that makes formal speech intelligible—shared information about football, civics, Shakespeare, Rosa Parks, Diego Rivera, and so on.

In the early grades of schooling in a democracy, the public sphere *should* take priority. No matter what special talents and interests we may encourage in a young child, all of us have to learn

The Anti-Curriculum Movement

Tragically and Unintentionally, It's Really an Anti-Equality Movement

It cannot be emphasized too strongly, nor repeated too often, that the most important cause of our educational shortcomings is not laziness, unionism, waywardness, stupidity, or any moral fault among the leaders of our educational enterprise. Rather, it is a system of attractive but unsound ideas. Known to educational historians as the progressive movement, these ideas took over in the United States during the latter half of the 20th century and remain very popular. The strength of the progressive movement—its lasting contribution—is its empathy with childhood. Its fatal flaw is its belief that the child-centered schooling it envisions can only be accomplished by resisting a rigorous academic curriculum and encouraging children to develop their

skills using whatever content they find engaging.

Today, it is widely believed that schools need to focus on critical-thinking skills, not facts. This succinctly summarizes the dominant theory now taught in the majority of our schools of education—although *no knowledgeable cognitive scientist agrees with it*. (Cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham explains how and why thinking depends on knowledge in “Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?” Go to www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer07/index.htm.) The anti-curriculum, formal-skills approach to schooling has wasted enormous amounts of school time in endless, unproductive drills.

Apologists tend to view the educational decline that has occurred since the middle of the 20th century as having been caused by an influx of Hispanic and black students. Since the decline happened after the influx, they think the influx must have caused it. My alternative explanation is that the influx of Hispanic and black students in the postdesegregation era coincided tragically with the rise of the progressive movement and resulting decline of the academic curriculum in the public schools. The history of the contents of our textbooks supports this thesis.¹ Once the academic curriculum

disappeared, no student, rich or poor, who grew up outside an enriched home environment (except for the odd voracious reader) could expect to become well educated. When a school ceases to offer a coherent academic curriculum, only a child who finds enrichment elsewhere can thrive academically.

The victory of the progressive, anti-curriculum movement has chiefly occurred in the crucial early grades, and the further down one goes in the grades, the more intense the resistance to academic subject matter, with the greatest wrath reserved for introducing academic knowledge in preschool. It does not seem to occur to the anti-curriculum advocates that the four-year-old children of rich, highly educated parents are gaining academic knowledge at home, while such knowledge is being unfairly withheld at school (albeit with noble intentions) from the children of the poor. For those who truly want equality, a common, content-rich core curriculum is the only option. It is the only way for our disadvantaged children to catch up to their more advantaged peers.

Teacher Preparation: It's More Indoctrination Than Education

Faith in the failed ideas of the progressive movement is sustained, unfortunately, by an intellectual monopoly within the majority of our teacher training institutions. Because of this monopoly, most of our new teachers are unaware of the large body of cognitive science research that does not support the central tenets of the progressive, anti-curriculum movement. I can illustrate this national problem with a personal anecdote. About 12 years ago, I began teaching in the



the same base-10 system of arithmetic; the same 26-letter alphabet; the same grammar, spelling, and connotations of words; and the same basic facts about the wider community to which we belong. Most modern nations impose that kind of compulsory early education because neither a democracy nor a modern economy can function properly without citizens who have enough shared knowledge to be loyal, competent, and able to communicate with one another.

Under this founding conception, the early curriculum can be viewed as a set of concentric circles. At the core are the knowledge and skills all

citizens should have. Beyond that is the knowledge, such as state history, that each state wants children to possess. Beyond that may be the knowledge and values agreed on by the locality. And finally, beyond that, are the activities and studies that fulfill the needs, talents, and interests of each individual student. From the standpoint of the public good, what must be imparted most clearly and explicitly are the central core elements common to all citizens of the republic. These need to be set forth specifically, grade by



School of Education at the University of Virginia. It was the twilight of my university career. My teaching reputation at the university was pretty high. I had taught for many years in the College of Arts and Sciences, in the English department, where my courses on literary theory and the Romantic period continued to be oversubscribed and to get top ratings from students. I had arranged with the dean of the education school to teach a course on the causes of and cure for the achievement gap between, on one hand, blacks and Hispanics, and, on the other, whites and Asians—a hot topic.

I expected to attract a lot of curious students and expose them to heterodox (i.e., pro-curriculum) views in the literature. I had by then written two books on K–12 education. One of them, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), was a bestseller, and the other, *The Schools We Need*, was placed by the *New York Times* on its rarified “Notable Books of the Year” list for 1996. Given the normal curiosity of students to take a course from the author of a bestseller, I expected to draw quite a few students even though my work was critical of the dominant ideas in American education schools. I was surprised when I drew just a handful—10 or so students, and no auditors. The next year the story was the same, as it was the year after that. In the third year, one of my students mentioned to me privately that I should be proud of the courage shown by my students; they were all in my class despite having been explicitly warned by members of the education faculty not to take the course.

I was astonished. This would not normally have happened over in Arts and Sciences, where professors, instead of shunning and shunting dissent, tended to exploit it. The controversialists would have held a big symposium and tried to create as many intellectual fireworks as possible. In the history department, even

Thomas Jefferson, the university’s revered founder, was the subject of various symposia in which anti-Jeffersonians were encouraged to have their say.

I am still stunned when I think about how students are being shielded from heterodox ideas in education schools. Subject-matter-oriented people are considered authoritarian, undemocratic, and right-wing. Their writings must not be assigned, and if their ideas are mentioned, it must be in the controlled environment of a properly decontaminated textbook.* (This totalitarian feature of present-day education schools was demonstrated in a data-rich article by David Steiner and Susan Rozen analyzing the syllabi of education courses.)²

*In fairness, I was invited to speak once at the Harvard School of Education and once at Teachers College at Columbia University. But those gestures of openness should be balanced by the hysterical reviews of my books in the *Harvard Educational Review* and the *Teachers College Record*, the upshot of which was in every case: “Don’t read this awful book.” The *Teachers College Record* honored *Cultural Literacy* with two fiercely hostile reviews in one issue, which was, I am told, a first. The review in the *Teachers College Record* of my 2006 book, *The Knowledge Deficit*, calls it an “infomercial” designed to sell my Core Knowledge books. That particular ad hominem “he’s just-doing-it-for-the-money” dismissal is the current response in lieu of a counterargument. In fact, I get no money from the Core Knowledge books, having from the start assigned all royalties to the foundation, from which I also receive no money.

Anyone interested in the schooling of our children should be aware of the ideological indoctrinations that our prospective teachers are required to undergo. Currently, teachers are being taught that progressivism is motivational and inculcates general skills, independent thought, love of learning, and critical thinking. By contrast, an academic curriculum is portrayed as anti-motivational, requiring rote learning of mere facts, and antipathetic to independent-mindedness, love of learning, and critical thinking. In truth, there is no inherent connection between establishing a definite curriculum and any particular form of instruction or classroom management. This is an absolutely critical point that is universally glossed over in teacher indoctrination. A dishonest trick is being played on our prospective teachers. There is no reason why a highly explicit multiyear academic curriculum cannot be taught in lively ways.

—E.D.H.

Endnotes

1. Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).
2. David Steiner and Susan Rozen, “Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers: An Analysis of Syllabi from a Sample of America’s Schools of Education,” in *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom? Appraising Old Answers and New Ideas*, ed. Frederick M. Hess, Andrew J. Rotherman, and Kate Walsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004), 119–148.

grade, so that one grade can build cumulatively on the prior one, allowing school time to be used effectively and putting all students in a given grade level on an equal footing.

We *all* have a stake in promoting an effective public sphere and a vibrant economy through our schools. The distinction between the private and public spheres is a founding conception that has made the United States a haven for freedom and an outstanding political success. But the public sphere cannot exist as a democratic vehicle for everyone unless everyone is schooled to participate in it. That goal requires a common core curriculum in the early grades. There is no practical way around that necessity.

All of our earliest educational thinkers agreed that precisely because we were a big, diverse country, our schools should offer many common topics to bring us together; if schools did so, they felt, we would be able to communicate with one another, act as a unified republic, and form bonds of loyalty and patriotism among our citizens.

The kind of education that will enable all our young people to access the public sphere and develop a sense of national solidarity is precisely the kind that will narrow the achievement gaps among demographic groups and raise the nation's average level of achievement.

Shared Knowledge Should Be Taught Using a Shared Curriculum

The policy implications of this article and my new book, *The Making of Americans*, can be boiled down to this: institute in your district or state an explicit, knowledge-rich, grade-by-grade core curriculum in grades K–8 that takes up at least 50 percent of school

time. There are no good educational arguments against a coherent, content-specific core curriculum that could possibly outweigh its superior efficacy and fairness. Nevertheless, prejudices against commonality, and indeed against any set curriculum, continue to dominate American education. (See “The Anti-Curriculum Movement” on page 10.)

In discussions of a common curriculum, the main question is always the conversation stopper, “Who will decide?” The problem has been solved in other multicultural liberal democracies. In fact,

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no high-performing and fair educational system has failed to solve it. If an American core curriculum can meet two criteria—*acceptability* and *effectiveness*—then the political problem can be solved, and there will be a real chance to reverse decades of American educational decline.*

Acceptability: We know from surveys that the public generally likes the idea of a common core and wants the schools to teach the traditions that hold the country together—traditions such as respect for those laws, institutions, and ideals of freedom and equality that Abraham Lincoln exhorted American schools to promote in order to preserve the union as the “last best hope of earth.” Lincoln’s view is seconded by most citizens. In the Public Agenda report *A Lot to Be Thankful For*, 84 percent of parents said they wanted their children to learn about America’s political institutions, history, and ideals of freedom and equality. Concerning civics, then, the American public has clearly decided the core-curriculum question. Moreover, few sensible people will wish to launch a campaign against a core curriculum in math and science, which are the same in China as in Chattanooga. But there is a lot more to elementary education than civics, math, and science. We also need agreement on a common core for history, art, music, and literature—a more daunting task that leads to the second characteristic a common core must exhibit: effectiveness.

Effectiveness: An explicit curriculum would be accepted in the United States if it were shown to be highly effective in imparting an ability to read, write, and learn at a high level. Hence the answer to the question “Who decides?” is “The community that makes up the public sphere has already largely decided.” A core curriculum that systematically imparts this content will be optimally effective

*Other, more technical attributes are that the early core curriculum must be highly specific and outlined grade by grade. Without specificity there can be no commonality, and then we fall into the vagueness trap of current state standards. Grade-by-grade definiteness is needed because the school year is the key time unit for the student, who usually moves to a new teacher at each new grade level.





ferent order could be equally effective.[†] But the substance of any such curriculum would need to be very similar to the Core Knowledge curriculum, because the taken-for-granted knowledge in the American public sphere is finite and definable. Core Knowledge did not decide what students should learn—it inventoried and then organized the knowledge that the public sphere assumes adults know.

Any effective curriculum would also need to be, like ours, grade-specific. This is a critical point for the following reasons:

Without a common core curriculum, the disparity in student readiness increases with each successive grade, slowing down progress and making the teacher's task ever more difficult.

in developing reading, writing, and learning ability, and in giving all children equal access to the public sphere.

In 1987, I ventured to set down an index to some of the knowledge students needed to possess to be proficient in the American standard language and full participants in the public sphere.¹¹ In the two decades since then, my colleagues and I at the Core Knowledge Foundation have transformed that list into a coherent core curriculum that is now being followed by hundreds of schools. Unsurprisingly, reading comprehension scores at these schools have soared.¹²

Other sequences that put the same basic knowledge in a dif-

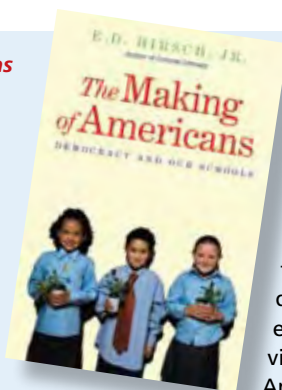
1. Specifying core content by year enables the teacher at each grade level to know what students already know, making it possible to communicate with the whole class and bring the group forward together. As Harold Stevenson and James Stigler pointed out in their pathbreaking book *The Learning Gap*, the American

(Continued on page 38)

[†]An alternative example with excellent results is the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, a public school for grades 6–8 (see www.roxburyprep.org). The school has developed a highly specific, grade-by-grade curriculum based on an analysis of the Massachusetts state standards (among the best in the country) and the kinds of knowledge probed by the state tests. It is a tremendous credit to this school that it has undertaken the immense labor required to create this curriculum.

The *Making of Americans* departs from and supplements my earlier books on education. It concerns itself, like them, with overcoming low literacy rates and narrowing the achievement gaps between demographic groups, but places those themes within the broader context of the founding ideals of the American experiment, which have been a beacon to us and the world.

If my arguments are accepted, it will mean repudiating ideas and slogans that have dominated early schooling for at least 70 years, and replacing them with different and more fundamental ideas. Only a grasp of the accidents of history can enable such change to prevail. The apparently benign idea of natural, child-centered education that took hold at the beginning of the 20th century came by gradual degrees to weaken our



country's competence and competitiveness, diminish our solidarity, and reduce equality of opportunity. It has almost nullified two of the most precious founding ideas of the United States: the idea of unity despite our differences and the idea of equality. The Founders viewed the making of Americans as the dominant purpose of the public school, and that purpose must be made dominant once again, enriched by the humane traditions of pedagogical practice that the child-centered movement introduced.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my late friend Albert Shanker, who was president of the American Federation of Teachers. I decided to write it while reading *Tough Liberal*, Richard Kahlenberg's fine biography of Shanker. Al's premature death 12 years ago was a

setback to American educational improvement. His unique combination of ideals, courage, and acumen was just what we needed—and still need—to reinstate the grand Enlightenment goals of the American school. His intellectual and political toughness and strong influence are irreplaceable. Al's intellectual biography is the very image of what American schooling was instituted to accomplish. When he started as a student in the schools of New York City, he did not speak English. No wonder he defended the great aim of assimilation at a time when it was unfashionable to do so. His adversaries liked to advert to the militancy of his earlier days as a union leader. But those of us who knew the statesmanlike Al of the 1980s and 1990s were drawn to his unique ability to overcome the left-right polarization of educational issues. I was especially grateful to Al for championing my ideas when it took great courage to do so.

—E.D.H.

Shared Knowledge

(Continued from page 13)

classroom's lack of productivity is not chiefly caused by diversity of ethnic and family background but by diversity of academic preparation. Without a common core curriculum, the disparity in student readiness increases with each successive grade, slowing down progress and making the teacher's task ever more difficult. In core-curriculum nations such as Finland and France, the disparity in students' knowledge, skills, and readiness to learn new material decreases over time.¹³

2. When critical knowledge gaps (for some students) and boring repetitions (for others) are avoided, student interest and motivation are enhanced and progress in learning speeds up. Many American teachers say that they spend several weeks at the start of each year in review. That is, they offer a minicourse in the things students need to know to go forward. To students who already know those things, the review is an occasion to start shooting spitballs. To students who are so far behind that they lack the knowledge needed to make sense of the review, it is an occasion for spitballs, too, because they are lost.

3. Instituting a common core curriculum is especially helpful for disadvantaged students who change schools. By third grade, some 50 to 60 percent of low-income students have changed schools, many in the middle of the year.¹⁴

4. Specific, grade-by-grade planning allows the entire curriculum to be integrated. The history of a period can be integrated with its literature, art, and music. Such integration leads to better retention and fuller understanding.

I have not encountered any cogent arguments against these reasons for greater commonality and specificity in the curriculum.

The need for a common core curriculum in the early grades is far greater in the United States than in other nations that actually have one. Americans move from one place to another in greater numbers than do residents of any other country. As a transethnic nation, we have a greater need for an *invented* common public sphere that is determined not by blood and soil, or hearth and home, but by trans-

ethnic traditions concerning our history, laws, and freedoms. The medium of this public sphere is language, which cannot be disentangled from specific, commonly shared knowledge. Such a curriculum is critical to the United States continuing to be, in Lincoln's words, "the last best hope of earth."¹⁵ □

Endnotes

1. Florida Department of Education, *2009 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Reading Sample Test and Answer Book, Grade 10* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, 2008), 9. http://fcat.fldoe.org/pdf/sample/0809/reading/FL09_STM_R_STB_G10_WT_001.pdf.
2. Ashis Ray, "Australia Brought Down to Earth," *Guardian Online*, January 20, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2008/jan/20/cricket.sport.
3. William R. Johnson and Derek Neal, "Basic Skills and the Black-White Earnings Gap," in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 480–497.
4. See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993), esp. 102–103.
5. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).
6. From George Washington's last will and testament: "It has been my ardent wish to see a plan devised on a liberal scale, which would have a tendency to sprd systematic ideas through all parts of this rising Empire, thereby to do away local attachments and State prejudices, as far as the nature of things would, or indeed ought to admit, from our National Councils." George Washington, "The Will," in *The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series*, ed. W. W. Abbott, vol. 4, April–December 1799 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 477–492.
7. "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum, Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 1, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 112.
8. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
9. See Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, eds., *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
10. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 17 (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 440.
11. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
12. Georgia J. Kosmoski, Geneva Gay, and Edward L. Vockell, "Cultural Literacy and Academic Achievement," *Journal of Experimental Education* 58 (1990): 265–272; and Joseph F. Pentony, "Cultural Literacy: A Concurrent Validation," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 52 (1992): 967–972. For a summary of research reports, see <http://coreknowledge.org/CK/about/research/index.htm>.
13. Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York: Summit, 1992); and Jean-Pierre Jarousse, Alain Mingat, and Marc Richard, "La Scolarisation Maternelle à Deux Ans: Effets Pédagogiques et Sociaux," *Éducation et Formations* 31 (1992): 3–9. See also M. Duthoit, "L'enfant et l'école: Aspects Synthétiques du Suivi d'un Échantillon de Vingt Mille Élèves des Écoles," *Éducation et Formations* 16 (1988): 3–13.
14. David T. Burkam, Valerie E. Lee, and Julie Dwyer, *School Mobility in the Early Elementary Grades: Frequency and Impact from Nationally-Representative Data* (paper prepared for the Workshop on the Impact of Mobility and Change on the Lives of Young Children, Schools, and Neighborhoods, June 29–30, 2009); and U.S. General Accounting Office, *Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education*, GAO/HEHS-94-45 (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994).
15. Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress" (Washington, DC, December 1, 1862). Concluding remarks, including this quote, are available at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>.

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