

# Sustaining the American Experiment

by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Over the years, it was not a lack of accurate ideas that has kept essential knowledge from reaching more children. It has been the difficulty of *changing* ideas that are held with an almost religious fervor by far too many influential people in the field of education.

The central insight of Core Knowledge is the scientific finding that language comprehension requires a mountain of unseen shared knowledge that is not spoken—a kind of dark energy that governs verbal comprehension. The schools’ neglect of this hidden knowledge has depressed language competence and perpetuated inequality. Those are not Hirsch-created ideas. They emerge from cognitive science and research into reading and literacy.

I’ll return to that research and its role, and to my main theme, the teaching of civics. First, though, allow me to digress with a few reminiscences about how we came to this gathering.

Picture a young man who had the soul of a hard scientist but who was undisciplined in college and drifting, and at two critical times of decision drifted first into literature, and then into education. Nothing better epitomizes the contradiction between my hard-science temperament and the soft *métiers* that I found myself in than a letter I received right after the book *Cultural Literacy* came out in 1987. It was from a very distinguished literary friend. He wrote something that has stuck in my memory. “Dear Don, you quote Plato in your book, saying ‘let us follow the argument whither it leads.’ But you don’t want to do that if it’s going to lead to a place where you know you don’t want to go.”

That encapsulates what C. P. Snow called “the two cultures”: the difference between the hard sciences, where the testing of hypotheses and the following of logical inferences is the norm, and a great deal of work in literature and education, where the answer is known before you start—because you already know that you are going to support a moral, aesthetic, or ideological stance of some kind.

Since boyhood, that kind of thinking has gone against my grain. As a boy, I liked those long syllogisms by Lewis Carroll where you can’t guess where his whimsical premises are going to lead until you have accurately followed the logical train.

The other pattern I see looking back was an instinct to restore balance. I very consciously pursued that ideal in my teaching—for instance, in my favorite course, the history of literary theory, which I taught for nearly 50 years. Into the 1960’s, my students all came to the class as Aristotelians who

believed that the mark of quality in literature was formal excellence. So my instinct was to urge Plato's counter argument that the mark of excellence was whether the work was good for you and your society. In the 1970s and 80s, however, things changed. My students came in as Platonists insisting that literature must be socially beneficial. With them I argued for Aristotle. In the end, I always tried to get their support for theorists who took the middle way, like Horace and Philip Sidney, who said literature is good when it is both well-made and good for you and your society.

I brought that balancing instinct into my scholarship on the romantics and interpretation theory, and eventually into education. I thought that New Criticism in literature and Progressivism in education shared the same overemphasis on the idea that students need how-to skills rather than relevant factual knowledge. New Critics disparaged historical and biographical facts and claimed that the how-to approach would unlock literature qua literature. Progressive education also disparaged "mere" facts and claimed that what students needed was critical thinking skills, then 20th century skills—and now 21st century skills. I was a dissenter not because I enjoyed courting controversy, but because I thought there needed to be a counter-balance to traditions that had become one sided—and thus inaccurate and ineffective. But notice the difference between what happened to the New Criticism and to Progressivism. New Criticism had to make its way in the rough and tumble of the arts and sciences, and it is no longer the dominant force in literary study. But Progressivism is still safely enthroned in its own domain. Over in arts and sciences, you can get a full professorship if you kill your intellectual fathers. But try father-killing in an education school, and you will be expelled by the intellectual monopoly that prevails there. The immovable orthodoxy that reigns in our teacher training institutions is very bad news for the nation—chiefly because the ideas are scientifically inadequate, and yield poor results.

In the long view, that system of ideas, that "thoughtworld," is the gravest problem in American K–12 education. Ideas determine practices. No matter what structural reforms we put in place, or what standards we impose, the results will remain stagnant so long as the ruling ideas of educators stay the same. Logic may yield right answers, and new policies may be enlightened, but they won't prevail until teachers and administrators change their ideas. The effectiveness of the Common Core standards will depend on the adequacy of the ideas held by those who try to put them into effect. Today, district preparations for the Common Core in language arts resemble district preparations for No Child Left Behind: lots of how-to processes under new names, but with little or no emphasis on systematically imparting facts—which are still considered "mere."

One way to counter this trend would be to create curriculum-based reading tests—that is, grade-by-grade tests with reading passages taken from the topics of the grade-by-grade school curriculum—the only truly fair kinds of reading tests in the early grades. If I were a billionaire who wasn't under the curriculum-neutral constraints governing the two Common Core assessment consortia, I'd simply have such tests made, and give them away—and let it be known

far and wide that if they were actually put into use verbal scores would rise significantly. Such tests might gradually change ideas, because their effects would be unmistakable.

In the end, nothing much is going to improve without a change of ideas about the importance of a knowledge-based curriculum, which is the only true skills curriculum. We need an army of Core-Knowledge Billy Grahams able to induce mass conversion experiences all over the country.

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Now let me turn to the relationship of civic knowledge to the well-being of the nation. This topic could be seen as another example of an instinct to restore balance. The NAEP record is startling. Civic knowledge as learned in school has declined precipitously in the past 50 years. That is one data point that even staunch defenders of the status quo concede.

What went wrong? After the Second World War, with the United States by far the most powerful and influential nation in the world, complacency reigned. America was on top. Few emphasized the educational tradition that the schools are needed to help unify and sustain this artificially patched-together nation. Along with this complacency, many began to grow disillusioned with U. S. policies—with militarism, Watergate, the Vietnam War. All over the country, in humanities departments and education schools, there developed an insistent criticism of the United States, particularly during the Vietnam period when it seemed far more important to criticize than to praise and sustain.

But to our earliest thinkers about education—like Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster—the inherent fragility of what they termed the American “experiment,” was ever present in their minds. They considered the U.S. an experiment in two respects. It was to be the first large republic made up of smaller republics—something new to human history. George Washington and others called it “our empire.” The stripes on the flag, and the motto “Out of Many One” expressed that conception. But the early thinkers also considered the United States to be an experiment in another respect: an *artificially* created nation based on ideas, and therefore sustainable only by schools that promulgated those ideas. People were to be bound together not by common traditions from a mythic past, but by common ideals about freedom, equality, democracy, and law, which could only be instilled by education.

Recognizing this, George Washington bequeathed a portion of his estate to education, stating in his will that his purpose was to help counteract the country’s fragmentation into region and faction, and to foster loyalty to the larger community. In 1786, Benjamin Rush stated that the aim of American schools was to create “Republican machines.” He was being urbane and arch in

that metaphor, which he used to stress the need for a common indoctrination in Enlightenment ideals, with everyone taught to pull together to make the republic work. These founding thinkers understood that continual nation-making was needed to sustain this new type of post-Enlightenment nation.

A few decades later, despite the national stain of slavery and racism, the school ideal expanded to include what Randolph Bourne termed “trans-national America,”—a union not just of many states but also of many ethnicities and races. This was a big change from earlier days when Benjamin Franklin famously disliked having even Germans in Pennsylvania—with their odd language and customs messing up the neat commonality of the commonwealth.

By the early 19th century, the ideal of the common school was becoming fully realized, along with the ideal of the melting pot. All persons, no matter their color or national origin, were to be Americanized into feeling patriotic sentiment and sharing ideals of equality and democracy. I’ll quote briefly from a speech you may recognize from 1838: Let it “*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 Primers, 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.*”

That was Abraham Lincoln, at the age of 28, and note the key phrase “*all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions.*” All were to be Americanized—not just the émigrés from Great Britain. That Universalist ideal was the central theme of the early common-school movement, as can be seen clearly in an 1848 account of the history of the common school in New York State, one of the most thrilling books I’ve ever read and one that I quote at length in my book, *The Making of Americans*. The making of American patriots continued to be a self-conscious aim of schools and schoolbooks well into the 1930s—to our good fortune. The common-school idea helped create the United States, and helped sustain it as a national community. It made the fragile experiment largely a success.

Now to the present, and an anecdote that illustrates the challenges we now face. A couple of months ago, I got a desperate email from my granddaughter Cleo, a wonderful do-gooder, newly graduated from college. She is teaching in a public school in the Bronx, where she is responsible for teaching the American Revolution to 7th graders. She had no guidance from New York

City or State or her school about just what to teach her students or what she could assume they already knew. I had some Core Knowledge teacher handbooks sent to her, and a few days later, I mentioned the incident in a blog, pointing out that teachers have an almost impossible job when they don't know what their students might be expected to know by way of background. I got a response from a New York teacher who said that Cleo could find out what her students already knew if she went to the official New York state website for American history standards. So I went to that site. Since American history wasn't taught at all in grade 6, I went to grade 5, and this is what I found. Please note the recurrence of the word "different."

*Different ethnic, national, and religious groups, including Native American Indians, have contributed to the cultural diversity of North American nations and regions by sharing their customs, traditions, beliefs, ideas, and languages.*

*Different people living in the Western Hemisphere may view the same event or issue from different perspectives.*

*The migration of groups of people in the United States, Canada, and Latin America has led to cultural diffusion because people carry their ideas and ways of life with them when they move from place to place. Key turning points and events in the histories of Canada, Latin America, and the United States can be organized into different historical time periods. For example, key turning points might include: 18th-century exploration and encounter; 19th-century westward migration and expansion, 20th-century population movement from rural to suburban areas. Important historic figures and groups have made significant contributions to the development of Canada, Latin America, and the United States. Industrial growth and development and urbanization have had important impacts on Canada, Latin America, and the United States.*

That's the so-called "content guide," which, as you see, is quite unclear whether emphasis should fall on Canada, Latin America, or the United States. The one thing that is clear from these standards is an attitude: Let's not be nationalistic. Let's not place any special focus on the United States—which would be overly narrow. Rather, let's learn unspecified things about the nations of two entire continents and their diversity. Thus, today, in New York State, the great cradle of the common school, the one definite thing to be learned is a trans-patriotic attitude: "Let's not assume that the USA deserves more emphasis than anyplace else in the western hemisphere." In this approach, New York is not unique. Similar guides are to be found in other states, residues of doctrines that are being promulgated in courses on the Foundations of Education under the reign of the "politics of difference," "multiculturalism," and the "New Left."

In my book, the *Making of Americans*, I quoted with admiration my late friend Richard Rorty—who made a distinction between my kind of liberal, the “Old Left”, exemplified by Dick himself, and also by the late Albert Shanker. Their view contrasts profoundly with the Academic Left, which, though it shares some causes with the Old Left such as racial equality, the women’s movement and gay rights, was—and is—also infected with political correctness in language, snobbish jargon, and anti-national attitudes. In 1994, Rorty wrote a memorable op-ed for the *New York Times* which foresaw with great prescience and eloquence how those attitudes would foreshadow Cleo’s problem:

*Most of us...still identify with our country. We take pride in being citizens of a self-invented, self-reforming, enduring constitutional democracy. We think of the United States as having glorious—if tarnished—national traditions. Many of the exceptions to this rule are found in academic departments that have become sanctuaries for left-wing political views. I am glad there are such sanctuaries, even though I wish we had a left more broadly based, less self-involved and less jargon-ridden than our present one....[Their] focus on marginalized groups will, in the long run, help to make our country much more decent, more tolerant and more civilized. But there is a problem with this left: it is unpatriotic. In the name of “the politics of difference,” it refuses to rejoice in the country it inhabits. It repudiates the idea of a national identity, and the emotion of national pride....The chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, recently proposed...town meetings to “explore the meaning of American identity.” [This was criticized as] ...“the gentlemanly face of nationalism,” and [as supporting] “the evil of a shared national identity.” It is important to insist that a sense of shared national identity is not an evil. It is an absolutely essential component of citizenship, of any attempt to take our country and its problems seriously. There is no incompatibility between respect for cultural differences and American patriotism....A nation cannot reform itself unless it takes pride in itself—unless it has an identity, rejoices in it, reflects upon it and tries to live up to it. Such pride sometimes takes the form of arrogant, bellicose nationalism. But it often takes the form of a yearning to live up to the nation’s professed ideals. If we fail in such identification, we fail in national hope. If we fail in national hope, we shall no longer even try to change our ways. If in the interests of ideological purity, or out of the need to stay as angry as possible, the academic left insists on a “politics of difference,” it will become increasingly isolated and ineffective. An unpatriotic left has never achieved anything. A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country’s politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt.*

Rorty’s prophecy has proved true. Over the past three decades, the Academic and Cultural Left has dominated in our education schools, especially in “foundations of education” courses, where nascent teachers are trained to scorn traditional American boosterism. This has caused a great deal of harm. Dick Rorty’s brave piece caused outrage among his colleagues, but it pointed to a key subtlety that we educators need to keep clearly in mind: the difference between nationalism and patriotism.

This difference is particularly American. Before the American experiment, “nation” was determined by place and birth. It had a tribal overtone. The attitude was well summarized in Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1807. He reassured his fellow citizens, who had just suffered a military defeat by Napoleon, that the German Teutons were nonetheless really much better than the French Gauls.

American patriotism is inherently different. It’s not based on birth but on a set of Enlightenment ideas. If Americans claim superiority, it’s certainly not because they are descended from Teutons or even Anglo Saxons, but because they have created a union based on ideas of equality, freedom, and toleration. A vigorous and successful United States could not have evolved if our schools had not deliberately sustained those ideals through national myths about courageous heroes who fought for those principles.

So we are left with Cleo’s dilemma. What shall I teach my students? Let’s grant to the Cultural Left its positive accomplishments and the validity of its impulses. Let’s also concede that we needn’t look back to the far-from-perfect 19th century for guidance, but need to look forward. But let’s not smugly remove one national mythic hero until we replace him or her with another who equally well promotes courage, democratic ideals, unity, and national pride. Shared heroes and common ideals are absolutely needed for the schools of the United States, no less today than in the past. To sustain heroes, it’s not necessary to tell lies, because there have been heroes. If you look for an example of how to do it, the *Core Knowledge Sequence* tries to strike the right balance between loyalty to ideals and historical truth. But that’s a rare example. Our teachers’ priorities have been distorted for several decades by fashionable and superficial theories, which claim moral superiority to a supposedly evil nationalism.

If I were asked what books teachers-in-training could usefully be exposed to, it would not be the fashionable anti-national, self-righteous ones being assigned today—those by Friere, Macedo, and other gurus. It would be the poetic musings of Benedict Anderson in his fine book *Imagined Communities*. That phrase exactly defines what the US is—an *imagined* community—imagined by the founders, and sustained and idealized by early textbook makers and by the creators of the common school.

In reading Benedict Anderson, teachers would encounter an eloquent distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Nationalism defines one group over against others. It sees differences as inherent and essential. (Unfortunately, so does a lot of so-called “multiculturalism.”) It is nativist, and uses terms that imply contamination and infiltration. That of course goes against the universalism of our founding ideals. The trans-national patriotism of the United States, symbolized by the flag, can accommodate all tribes within a larger conceptual loyalty learned in childhood.

In closing, let me sum up what the great patriots of the common-school movement understood: that only an *imagined* community can embrace a country this big. The common-school ideal doesn't need to look backwards, but it does need to be sustained—and reformulated for a new era. The themes of the Declaration hold in all centuries, as Lincoln insisted at the end of his pre-presidential speech in Milwaukee. Patriotism, says Benedict Anderson, “does not differ...from other affections in which there is always an element of fond imagining.” The affections learned in childhood are “parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.” The American experiment will cease to thrive when those imaginings and loyalties cease to be nurtured in our schools.

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*This piece was adapted from a speech given by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. on December 4, 2013, at a tribute event honoring his contributions to the field of education.*