

HOW TO EDUCATE AN AMERICAN

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THE CONSERVATIVE VISION FOR
TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS

Edited by

Michael J. Petrilli and
Chester E. Finn, Jr.



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Preface

by Senator Lamar Alexander

I WAS PARTICIPATING in a humdrum educators' roundtable in Buffalo, New York, in 1988 when "Monk" Malloy, president of the University of Notre Dame, asked this question: "What is the purpose of a *public school*?"

There was a long silence until finally Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, proposed this answer: "The public school was created for the purpose of teaching immigrant children reading, writing, and arithmetic and what it means to be an American with the hope that they would then go home and teach their parents."

The reason to read this book is to judge for yourself whether the twenty-two conservative luminaries who wrote its chapters have produced a better answer today to Malloy's question than Albert Shanker did thirty years ago.

Shanker was a patriot—an old-fashioned, anticommunist, Hubert Humphrey–liberal Democrat union organizer whose parents had immigrated from Poland. So he and this book's conservative writers agreed on one thing: In coeditor Chester Finn's words, "Schools should inculcate a solid understanding of and appreciation for why America exists and what it stands for, to transmit history and civics and, yes, a positive attitude toward its strengths as well as a reasoned commitment to addressing its weakness." Or, in Shanker's words, "Public schools played a big role in holding our nation together. They brought together children of different races, languages, religions, and

cultures and gave them a common language and a sense of common purpose. We have not outgrown our need for this; far from it.”

Today, there is elite disdain for such Americanism. But this is not a popular attitude. Most audiences applaud and some come to their feet when I say, “We should teach more United States history in our schools so our children can grow up knowing what it means to be an American.” There is bipartisan support for this sentiment. After September 11, 2001, George W. Bush and Al Gore both reminded the nation that principles create the American character—not considerations of race, religion, or national origin. In my first address to the US Senate, I introduced a bill to create summer academies for outstanding students and teachers of US history. Within a day, Senator Ted Kennedy had rounded up nearly twenty Democratic cosponsors without my asking. Especially in today’s internet democracy, an era Peggy Noonan calls “The Great Estrangement,” Americans are hungry for institutions that unite. I suspect that most would agree that it would be a good idea to begin each school day with a student leading the Pledge of Allegiance and then giving his or her version of what it means to be an American.

According to education historian Patricia Graham, “Schools in America have danced to different drummers through their long history”—and schools have a very long history. Hunter-gatherer “play schools” helped children learn to survive. Sumerian schools taught scribes to help a culture survive. During the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, schools taught youngsters to work and got them out from under their parents’ feet. Sociologist James Coleman said that in early America, schools helped parents do what parents could not do as well. That was especially true for teaching literacy. Graham says, “Now the drumbeat demands that all children achieve academically at a high level and the measure of that achievement is tests.”

This book’s conservative writers would temper that drumbeat with a second great conservative goal—in the coeditors’ words, “to restore character, virtue, and morality to the head of the education table where

they belong.” This is no new thought. Plato said schools should create good men who act nobly. Thomas Jefferson believed that a democracy granting broad liberties needed institutions instilling moral restraint. But Yuval Levin’s essay suggests why character education does not rise so easily on a liberal list of priorities: progressive education wants to liberate the student to be himself or herself, Levin writes, while conservative education wants to form the student to be better suited to the responsibilities of citizenship.

After embracing citizenship and character, the book’s authors diverge in their emphases. Several show a healthy respect for school choice but also for its limits. There is a shout-out for career and technical education. To me, Bill Bennett’s chapter is the most persuasive. He argues that content must be at the center of any conservative consensus on education. He reminds us that in the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives were leading a content crusade with E. D. Hirsch and Governors John Engler, Tommy Thompson, and Jeb Bush as well as Bennett himself as chief architects. This movement was called (shall we whisper it?) “Common Core.” This state-by-state reformation of school standards and curricula was well underway when the Obama administration tried to push it faster by making Common Core a quasi-federal mandate. Republicans imagined black helicopters flying. What conservatives had invented, many Republican legislators had voted into state law, and hundreds of thousands of classroom teachers in forty-five states expected they’d be teaching was suddenly condemned and abandoned . . . by conservatives.

This abandonment was less complete than it would appear. Last year, our daughter’s family lived with us in Tennessee while her home was being remodeled. She placed two sons in a nearby mountain elementary school. When the boys returned home to their Westchester County, New York, public school, I asked, “Did they have trouble adjusting?” “Nope,” she said. “Common Core here. Common Core there.” Many states simply renamed Common Core to avoid political flak and charged ahead. One advocate told me, “We won. But we’re not allowed to say so.”

The backlash to Common Core brings me to the most obvious mission missing from this volume's conservative agenda: local control of schools. America was created community by community. The initiative for American public schools was entirely at the local level, Marc Tucker has written. He termed this an "accident of localism."

I have spent much of my public life trying to preserve this localism. To begin with, federalism—the dispersal of central authority—is a crucial tenet of American liberty. Our revolution, after all, was mostly about distaste for a king. As a practical matter, my experience is that those governing education from a distance have good intentions but limited capacity and that schools can be only as good as parents, teachers, and citizens in a community want them to be. The saga of Common Core is the greatest proof of this pudding. Here was a conservative crusade—new rigor in what students needed to know—blown up by conservatives' fear that Washington, DC, was forcing them to do it. The Common Core federal directive was piled on top of other dictates from Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama on how to define standards, teaching, tests, curricula, and remedies for low-performing schools. Almost everyone in public schools became sick of Washington telling them what to do. So, in 2015, teacher unions and governors united to help Congress enact the "Every Student Succeeds Act," which the *Wall Street Journal* said was "the largest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter century."

Now, after the rise and fall of a national school board, our one hundred thousand public schools have about the same balance between federal leadership and state and local autonomy that existed during the George H. W. Bush administration. Once again, we have it about right. Thirty years ago, President Bush and the governors set the nation's first national education goals and then launched an "America 2000" initiative to help states meet those goals by creating voluntary standards, voluntary tests, and start-from-scratch schools. This was done the hard way, state by state and community by community—not

by federal mandates. Today's environment is ripe for a revival of a content-based conservative consensus, or in Bill Bennett's words "a great relearning," as the best way for our public schools to help our country get where we want it to go. But this time, let's avoid the lure of federal mandates and do the job the American Way: state by state, community by community.

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Also aiding us were more individuals than we can name, but allow us at least to recognize the contributions of Evan Abramsky, Jack Butler, Abigail Guidera, and Cecilia Joy Perez at the American Enterprise Institute; Jane Hale at Princeton University; Vita Dougherty; Laura Brownlee and Laura Davis at the Philanthropy Roundtable; Christopher Mohrman and Karen Nussle at Conservative Leaders for Education; and David Cleary and Liz Wolgemuth from Senator Alexander's team.

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Indebted as we are to so many others, we—and the authors—are responsible for all that follows.

HOW TO EDUCATE AN AMERICAN

Introduction

TIME TO REENGAGE

by Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr.

WE CANNOT BE sure whether the national education reform movement that roared across America from *A Nation at Risk* (1983) until recently has halted or simply paused. Reform, however, is definitely at a low ebb—and most student scores and other outcome measures remain flatter at lower levels than the country needs. While reform efforts still inch along in some states and communities, they appear to inch backward almost as often. This deceleration creates a discouraging yet valuable moment for everyone, conservatives included, to contemplate the future of American education while considering past successes and earlier mistakes.

We applaud the successes. Schools today are far more often judged by their results and the gains made by their pupils than by the money spent on them or the programmatic bells and whistles that they offer. Standards and expectations are higher almost everywhere. Achievement has risen a bit, at least in the earlier grades, and especially for the lowest performers. Some learning gaps are narrower, and many opportunities are wider. Career and technical education is enjoying something of a revival. Millions more families have options for their children's education, as it's no longer taken for granted that students will attend the district-operated public schools closest to their homes.

As we celebrate these accomplishments, we should also reflect on how they came about. Many of their driving ideas were conservative in origin, although making them happen typically entailed biparti-

sanship and compromise, as Democrats and Republicans, left and right (but mostly center-left and center-right), found common ground on behalf of big changes in a deeply entrenched system that was not successfully serving many of their children or the society in which they live. Among the conservative leaders who championed such reforms, the majority were governors and legislators, but key roles were also played by presidents from Ronald Reagan through the Bushes 41 and 43, teaming up with equity-minded progressives, and often with business and civil rights groups that found it possible to link arms. The shared goal was to help more young Americans find opportunity and success, thus addressing conservatives' desire for better outcomes and more choices along with progressives' desire to make the system fairer and close long-standing learning gaps.

Bipartisanship is in tatters today in many realms of our national life, and that's a big problem on countless fronts. Yet it's also an opportunity for conservatives to recognize that the gains made with bipartisanship's help meant suppressing some important differences and neglecting some vital elements of schooling in particular and education in general. As Yuval Levin argues in this volume, it's time to unmask those differences, understand what's been neglected or distorted, address some troubling education voids, and see if we can renegotiate terms before the next wave of reform. Even if we cannot immediately renegotiate, we should at least be able to get our own goals and priorities straight. We suspect that others, including people who don't generally call themselves conservative, will nod in agreement with many of those goals, such as the strengthening of children's knowledge, character, motivation, and civic readiness for which many of the following essays call. But conservatives themselves may benefit from thoughtful engagement with others on the goals that are not fully shared.

That's essential because, as Robby George argues in an essay that follows, "viewpoint diversity" leads to better understanding of the truth. Conservatives have important truths to speak that often aren't

heard (or heeded) in discussions of public education—sometimes because conservatives have circumscribed their own truth-seeking behind a wall labeled “school choice” and have withdrawn their own children into schools that suit them without paying great heed to the education of others or the broader needs of the country we all inhabit. Today’s reform hiatus creates a space in which conservatives can refresh their own thinking about schooling’s proper role and the contents of a first-rate education.

For America to have the prosperous, secure, and vibrant future that we all want, and for our children and grandchildren to enjoy their full measure of that future while contributing their very best to it, we need a primary-secondary education system that delivers the goods—and delivers them for everyone, not just those with the means to procure something special for their own daughters and sons.

For conservatives to absent themselves from the conversation about how to bring about that future, and retreat into enclaves and echo chambers of their own while mouthing (or earnestly insisting on) the policy nostrums of the 1990s, is not just irresponsible. It also yields the shaping of that future to those who now term themselves “progressives.” Is there a conservative alive today who actually welcomes that prospect?

We do not. And so, with the help of the Kern Family Foundation, which supported this venture; the Hoover Institution, which cohosted the lively and provocative speaker events that launched it; and the Templeton Press, which saw the value of publishing the speakers’ analyses and ideas, we invited eighteen prominent, right-thinking leaders to join with us in a major act of refreshment. (Two of them invited colleagues to join us as coauthors.)

For this endeavor, we did not turn to our usual friends in the small universe of right-of-center education-policy wonkdom (though we were honored to include two prominent former education secretaries, both friends of ours, plus a third—also a friend—who graced this volume with its wise preface). For the most part, we already know what

our fellow wonks think—and we weren't looking for the nuts and bolts of detailed policy proposals. We sought instead for big thinkers—public intellectuals and scholars whose work includes education but doesn't focus on policy prescriptions.

Those who answered our call are a most impressive lot, if we say so ourselves. (The reader will likely recognize many names, and short bios of all contributors appear beginning on page 261.)

We didn't tell our authors what to focus on, simply to help us “address the big questions about where America finds itself at this moment in history, where we're going (or should go), and the role of primary-secondary education in taking us there.” As should be expected from this cadre of creative thinkers, they set off in many directions—but as the reader will discover, their separate musings turned out to revolve around several key themes.

In part 1, Eliot Cohen and Jonah Goldberg make a powerful case for rekindling students' understanding of American history, civics, and citizenship, including the kind that inculcates an informed love of country even as it acknowledges past failings and present challenges. Adam Meyerson (joined by his colleague Adam Kissel) unpacks some ways that private philanthropy can advance this kind of education. And Robby George explains why that education must be delivered in ways that invite young people to grapple with competing views and conflicting ideas and neither be indoctrinated into groupthink nor shielded from things they may find unexpected or disagreeable.

In part 2, we turn to vital elements of education that often transcend the cognitive and curricular. Pete Wehner examines the decline of character education and the urgency of revitalizing it, while Bill Damon explains the crucial role that having “purpose” in one's life plays in the formation of young people and how that quest connects to citizenship education and love of country. Rod Paige links purpose to striving, the motivation to learn and make something of oneself, and suggests that attention to student effort has been sorely missing from yesterday's education-reform efforts. Michael Barone tackles the

education of highly able students who are keen to learn more—a key example of striving. Heather Mac Donald shows how none of this can happen in disorderly classrooms and violent schools, arguing that fashionable but squishy discipline practices cause the greatest harm to the very children whom advocates of such practices think they're helping. And Arthur Brooks (joined by Nathan Thompson) explains why everyone needs to “be needed” in order to enjoy the dignity that gives purpose to life and grounds for striving—and how many of today's popular policy nostrums (e.g., “college for all”) actually widen the “dignity gap” for many Americans.

We reconnect education to family and community in part 3, again illustrating some of the limits of vogueish policies and practices. Nick Eberstadt shows how many men entirely outside the labor force (i.e., neither working nor seeking work) are there for reasons largely (though not entirely) beyond the reach of K–12 education. Naomi Schaefer Riley explains how children in foster care and otherwise lacking effective parental mentors and navigators need schooling (and other services) that choice alone cannot furnish. Ian Rowe and Mona Charen both take up the “success sequence”—finishing school, getting a job, getting married, then having children, in that order, or else success in life is far less likely to come their way. Charen shows how educators ill-serve disadvantaged youngsters when they shy away from teaching hard truths about the consequences of deviating from that sequence, while Rowe contends that having two parents in one's life is so important to one's education that family structure must become one of the key variables when achievement is analyzed.

Also in part 3, Kay Hymowitz points to child-centric parenting practices, reinforced by schools' endless celebration of individuality, and explains how these habits, all but uniquely American, are harmful to young people's acquisition of a proper work ethic and capacity for collaboration, while Ramesh Ponnuru eloquently depicts the harm done to many youngsters' actual futures by the assumption among educators (and others) that all must attend college.

In part 4, we wrap up with a renewed and revitalized conservative education agenda for America, featuring Yuval Levin, Bill Bennett, and ourselves.

We encourage you to read, enjoy, learn from, and act upon the many keen insights and perceptive suggestions that follow. We'll catch up with you again at the end.

PART I

History, Civics, and Citizenship

Irradiating the Past

by *Jonah Goldberg*

When the past no longer illuminates the future,
the spirit walks in darkness.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

FEW STUDENTS TODAY—OR their parents—saw the 1964 James Bond movie *Goldfinger* when it premiered. Like many old Bond films, it violates some modern norms, particularly of the #MeToo variety. But in one respect, it remains very relevant. Its eponymous villain, Auric Goldfinger, loves only gold. The story climaxes at Fort Knox, the famous gold depository, though Goldfinger's plan is not to steal the treasure there but to irradiate it, making it unusable. This will increase the value of Goldfinger's own hoard of gold.

Naturally, because it's a James Bond movie and Goldfinger is the villain, he fails. But his plot is akin to something happening in modern education and our culture, where the largely well-intentioned villains are mostly succeeding in irradiating the historical gold reserve of our civic tradition and national narrative. They seek to make vast swaths of the American story unusable, leaving only their narrative as acceptable currency in the marketplace of ideas. They want to make their stories the only usable past.¹

This is not new. Radical historians, primarily in the 1910s, the 1930s, and the 1960s, rewrote or revised the standard American story (necessarily, in some cases). It was a mixed effort.² But this is how things go. The intergenerational construction of an American narrative must be conversational, to borrow Michael Oakeshott's metaphor

for politics. This is how we understand our past, present, and future selves.³ No historical school monopolizes our national narrative; only competition/conversation of narratives and interpretations deepens our appreciation of our national identity. But today's efforts are not voices in this conversation; they are attempts to shut up everyone else.

These efforts both are helped by and contribute to a crisis of American ignorance. We shouldn't expect the average American to know who Oakeshott was, though would that more did. But every American should know what the Constitution's First Amendment says. Yet more than a third of Americans surveyed by the Annenberg Center for Public Policy in September 2017 failed to name a single First Amendment freedom. Only 26 percent could name all three branches of government; 33 percent couldn't name any branch.⁴ Similar results appear elsewhere. Only one respondent out of more than a thousand in a Freedom Forum survey could name all five First Amendment freedoms, but 9 percent said they believed it protected the right to bear arms.⁵ Just 36 percent of Americans passed (i.e., scored above 60) a multiple-choice series of questions derived from the US citizenship test, according to a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation survey. More than two-thirds couldn't identify the thirteen states that ratified the Constitution. Less than a quarter knew why we fought the British. More than one in ten Americans (12 percent) thought Dwight Eisenhower was a Civil War general (6 percent thought he was a Vietnam general). Only a quarter (24 percent) could name a single thing Benjamin Franklin was famous for, and more than a third believed he invented the lightbulb. At least only 2 percent of Americans said the Cold War was caused by climate change. Most striking: This survey's results differed vastly by age. 74 percent of people sixty-five and older passed but only 19 percent of those forty-five and younger passed.⁶

This might help explain the shocking attitudes of today's young. A generation after global communism's collapse, and during history's greatest poverty alleviation (thanks to spreading market-based economies),⁷ more Americans ages eighteen to twenty-nine view socialism positively (51 percent) than do capitalism (45 percent).⁸ A movement of

campus agitation that started a half-century ago, purportedly inspired by free speech, has culminated in a generation in which 40 percent of Americans ages eighteen to thirty-four think the government should ban “hateful” speech.⁹ And 30 percent of Millennials born in a country established as a democratic republic more than two hundred years ago no longer prioritize living in a democracy.¹⁰

Our educational institutions are failing our students in at least this respect (if not also in many others, as other essays in this volume demonstrate). But children attend school for years, and ever more attend postsecondary institutions. What are they actually learning? The distressing answer is that American students are increasingly being taught that they can learn nothing valuable from America’s past except the evil of our constitutional order and our most basic civic institutions.

Now, most teachers do not set out to do this, particularly in K–12 education. I have met too many patriotic and professional teachers who think otherwise. Indeed, they often fight against larger cultural and educational forces. But they are either unwilling or unable to overcome those forces—namely, a cultural movement that began to reject America’s past, capitalism’s propensity to create an intellectual class hostile to the moral underpinnings of the society, the changes in the way young people think, and the regnant self-loathing elite ideology.

Let us examine these in turn.

First, there is the progressive rejection of America’s past. For most of our history, America’s future-focused attitude was a boon, and an essential part of American exceptionalism; its citizens self-consciously envisioned themselves as leaving behind the feudal and aristocratic prejudices of the Old World. This attitude is a healthy part of our culture, but only when restrained by civic pride, patriotism, and local institutions. Starting in the Progressive Era, however, when America’s own tradition was just barely old enough to be thought archaic, intellectuals declared war on it, believing that scientific tools wielded by “disinterested” experts could liberate citizens in ways that the outdated system of “negative liberty” could not. The Constitution, for

the progressives, was a “Newtonian” relic in need of replacement by a more “Darwinian” conception of guided evolution.¹¹

Progressive educators, who relished the idea of creating a new citizenry, embraced this. John Dewey mixed a patriotic desire for assimilation with a progressive lust for social engineering. As Thomas Sowell writes, “John Dewey saw the role of the teacher not as a transmitter of a society’s culture to the young, but as an agent of change—someone strategically placed with an opportunity to condition students to want a different kind of society.”¹² While president of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson tasked educators with producing men “as unlike their fathers as possible.”¹³ From kindergarten to college, educators would reshape students as they saw fit.

The second force is capitalism’s self-destructive nature. The great economist Joseph Schumpeter predicted capitalism’s doom in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, arguing that capitalism tends to burn through the social capital needed to sustain itself. Its relentless efficiency destroys not just bad institutions and customs, but also indispensable ones. For Schumpeter, writes economist and historian Deirdre McCloskey, “capitalism was raising up its own grave diggers—not in the proletariat, as Marx had expected, but in the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie itself.”¹⁴

Schumpeter argued that mass prosperity produced intellectuals: artists, writers, bureaucrats, and, most importantly, educators. Historically, intellectuals served throne and altar. But when society protects the market and free expression, and a mass audience can support intellectuals, little constrains their work. According to Schumpeter, these intellectuals would inevitably then argue that they as a class should rule. “For such an atmosphere to develop,” Schumpeter writes, “it is necessary that there be groups whose interest it is to work up and organize resentment, to nurse it, to voice it and to lead it.”¹⁵ Schumpeter called this group the “new class.”