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E. D. Hirsch's Curriculum for Democracy

A content-rich pedagogy makes better citizens and smarter kids.

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At his Senate confirmation hearing in February, Arne Duncan succinctly summarized the Obama administration's approach to education reform: "We must build upon what works. We must stop doing what doesn't work." Since becoming education secretary, Duncan has launched a \$4.3 billion federal "Race to the Top" initiative that encourages states to experiment with various accountability reforms. Yet he has ignored one state reform that has proven to work, as well as the education thinker whose ideas inspired it. The state is Massachusetts, and the education thinker is E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

The "Massachusetts miracle," in which Bay State students' soaring test scores broke records, was the direct consequence of the state legislature's passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act, which established knowledge-based standards for all grades and a rigorous testing system linked to the new standards. And those standards, Massachusetts reformers have acknowledged, are Hirsch's legacy. If the Obama administration truly wants to have a positive impact on American education, it should embrace Hirsch's ideas and urge other states to do the same.

Hirsch draws his insights from well outside traditional education scholarship. He started out studying chemistry at Cornell University but, mesmerized by Nabokov's lectures on Russian literature, switched his major to English. Hirsch did his graduate studies at Yale, one of the citadels in the 1950s of the New Criticism, which argued that the intent of an author, the reader's subjective response, and the text's historical background were largely irrelevant to a critical analysis of the text itself. But by the time Hirsch wrote his doctoral dissertation—on Wordsworth—he was already breaking with the New Critics. "I came to see that the text alone is not enough," Hirsch said to me recently at his Charlottesville, Virginia, home. "The unspoken—that is, relevant background knowledge—is absolutely crucial in reading a text." Hirsch's big work of literary theory in his early academic career, *Validity in Interpretation*, reflected this shift in thinking. After publishing several more well-received scholarly books and articles, he received an endowed professorship and became chairman of the English department at the University of Virginia.

Hirsch was at the pinnacle of the academic world, in his mid-fifties, when he was struck by an insight into how reading is taught that, he says, "changed my life." He was "feeling guilty" about the department's inadequate freshman writing course, he recalls. Though UVA's admissions standards were as competitive as the Ivies', the reading and writing skills of many incoming

students were poor, sure to handicap them in their future academic work. In trying to figure out how to close this “literacy gap,” Hirsch conducted an experiment on reading comprehension, using two groups of college students. Members of the first group possessed broad background knowledge in subjects like history, geography, civics, the arts, and basic science; members of the second, often from disadvantaged homes, lacked such knowledge. The knowledgeable students, it turned out, could far more easily comprehend and analyze difficult college-level texts (both fiction and nonfiction) than their poorly informed brethren could. Hirsch had discovered “a way to measure the variations in reading skill attributable to variations in the relevant background knowledge of audiences.”

This finding, first published in a psychology journal, was consistent with Hirsch’s past scholarship, in which he had argued that the author takes for granted that his readers have crucial background knowledge. Hirsch was also convinced that the problem of inadequate background knowledge began in the early grades. Elementary school teachers thus had to be more explicit about imparting such knowledge to students—indeed, this was even more important than teaching the “skills” of reading and writing, Hirsch believed. Hirsch’s insight contravened the conventional wisdom in the nation’s education schools: that teaching facts was unimportant, and that students instead should learn “how to” skills.

Hirsch gave a lecture on the implications of his study at a Modern Language Association conference and then expanded the argument in a 1983 article, titled “Cultural Literacy,” in *The American Scholar*. The article caused a stir, not so much in the academy (and certainly not in the ed schools) as among public intellectuals. William Bennett, then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, encouraged Hirsch to pursue his theme. Education historian Diane Ravitch urged him to get a book out fast and to call it *Cultural Literacy* as well.

Hirsch heeded the advice, and in 1987, the book landed on the *New York Times*’s bestseller list, where it stayed for 26 weeks, resulting in a dramatic career change for the author. He kept researching and writing about how to improve the “cultural literacy” of young Americans and launched the Core Knowledge Foundation, which sought to create a knowledge-based curriculum for the nation’s elementary schools. A wide range of scholars assisted him in specifying the knowledge that children in grades K–8 needed to become proficient readers. For example, the Core Knowledge curriculum specifies that in English language arts, all second-graders read poems by Robert Louis Stevenson, Emily Dickinson, and Gwendolyn Brooks, as well as stories by Rudyard Kipling, E. B. White, and Hans Christian Andersen. In history and geography, the children study the world’s great rivers, ancient Rome, and the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, among other subjects.

By the late 1980s, Hirsch had all but abandoned academic literary studies and become a full-time education reformer. His curriculum appeared at an opportune moment. Four years earlier, the U.S. government had released *A Nation at Risk*, a widely publicized report about falling SAT scores and the mediocre education that most American kids were getting. The report set off shock waves among parents, many of whom weren’t thrilled, either, when they heard educators

dismissing the report's implications. Parents saw Hirsch's call for a coherent grade-by-grade curriculum as an answer.

I was one of those parents. My children were students at P.S. 87 on Manhattan's Upper West Side, also known as the William Tecumseh Sherman School. Our school enjoyed a reputation as one of the city's education jewels, and parents clamored to get their kids in. But most of the teachers and principals had trained at Columbia University's Teachers College, a bastion of so-called progressive education, and militantly defended the progressive-ed doctrine that facts were pedagogically unimportant. I once asked my younger son and some of his classmates, all top fifth-grade students, whether they knew anything about the historical figure after whom their school was named. Not only were they clueless about the military leader who delivered the final blow that brought down America's slave empire; they hardly knew anything about the Civil War, either. When I complained to the school's principal, he reassured me: "Our kids don't need to learn about the Civil War. What they are learning at P.S. 87 is *how* to learn about the Civil War."

Were it not for Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, I might have accepted the reassurance. But Hirsch, as it happened, had cited an experiment that found that college students unable to comprehend a difficult passage about the Civil War by historian Bruce Catton were also likely not to have learned anything about the Civil War in the early grades. From that point on, my wife and I accelerated our children's supplementary home schooling and sometimes used the Core Knowledge Foundation's guide to the "mere facts" that children should know in each grade.

Like *A Nation at Risk*, *Cultural Literacy* came under fierce attack by education progressives, partly for its theory of reading comprehension but even more for its supposedly elitist presumption that a white male college professor should decide what American children learn. Critics derided Hirsch's lists of names, events, and dates as arbitrary, even racist. The progressives often lumped him in with the three "killer Bs"—Bennett, (Allan) Bloom, and (Saul) Bellow—whom they loved to hate at the height of the 1980s culture wars. Because Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* appeared just above *Cultural Literacy* on the bestseller lists for most of 1987, many liberal commentators paired the two writers, calling them conservatives agitating for a return to a more traditional, elitist education.

In fact, Hirsch is and always has been a liberal Democrat. Far from being elitist, he insists, cultural literacy is the path to educational equality and full citizenship for the nation's minority groups. "Cultural literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children," Hirsch writes, and "the only reliable way of combating the social determinism that now condemns them to remain in the same social and educational condition as their parents. That children from poor and illiterate homes tend to remain poor and illiterate is an unacceptable failure of our schools, one which has occurred not because our teachers are inept but chiefly because they are compelled to teach a fragmented curriculum based on faulty educational theories."

Hirsch's next book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1999), took the argument about core knowledge and educational equity to the next level by dismantling those faulty theories. Hirsch's early academic work on Wordsworth and the Romantics helped him in this project, since he could see how the progressives' education agenda was rooted in a deeply flawed understanding of child development that went back to Rousseau. "The Romantics were wonderful for poetry but wrong about life," Hirsch tells me, "and they were particularly wrong about education." European Romanticism, he argued in the book, "has been a post-Enlightenment aberration, a mistake we need to correct."

Influenced by the Romantics, progressive-education doctrine held that children learn best "naturally" and that we should not drill "lifeless" facts into their developing minds. Such views, which became prevalent in American teacher training by the 1920s, Hirsch shows, represented a sharp break with the Founding Fathers, who believed that children needed to learn a coherent, shared body of knowledge for the new democracy to work. Thomas Jefferson even proposed a common curriculum, so that children's "memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history."

By the time Hirsch turned his attention to education reform in the mid-1980s, Romanticism's triumph was complete. Most public schools, for instance, taught reading through the "whole language" method, which encourages children to guess the meaning of words through context clues rather than to master the English phonetic code. In many schools, a teacher could no longer line up children's desks in rows facing him; indeed, he found himself banished entirely from the front of the classroom, becoming a "guide on the side" instead of a "sage on the stage." In my children's elementary school, students in the early grades had no desks at all but instead sat in circles on a rug, hoping to re-create the "natural" environment that education progressives believed would facilitate learning. In the 1970s and 1980s, progressive education also absorbed the trendy new doctrines of multiculturalism, postmodernism (with its dogma that objective facts don't exist), and social-justice teaching.

More powerfully than any previous critic, Hirsch showed how destructive these instructional approaches were. The idea that schools could starve children of factual knowledge, yet somehow encourage them to be "critical thinkers" and teach them to "learn how to learn," defied common sense. But Hirsch also summoned irrefutable evidence from the hard sciences to eviscerate progressive-ed doctrines. Hirsch had spent the better part of the decade since *Cultural Literacy* mastering the findings of neurobiology, cognitive psychology, and psycholinguistics on which teaching methods best promote student learning. The scientific consensus showed that schools could not raise student achievement by letting students construct their own knowledge. The pedagogy that mainstream scientific research supported, Hirsch showed, was direct instruction by knowledgeable teachers who knew how to transmit their knowledge to students—the very opposite of what the progressives promoted.

The ed-school establishment has worked busily to discredit Hirsch. In 1997, the journal of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the umbrella organization representing

most education professors and researchers, launched an unprecedented 6,000-word dismissal of his work. Hirsch recounts, too, how he finally got the nod to teach one course on the black-white achievement gap—a hot topic—in Virginia’s education department, though not until he had won all of his university’s academic honors, written one best-selling book on education, and written another listed by the *New York Times* as a notable book of the year. But whereas his courses in the English department always overflowed with students, his education course drew only a handful for three straight years. Finally, one of the students broke the news: the education faculty had repeatedly warned them not to take the course.

Hirsch shrugs off these slights and keeps working. At 81, he has written what may be his most important book, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, which deepens his argument about the American Founders’ support for core knowledge.

Hirsch recounts the famous story of Benjamin Franklin leaving the Constitutional Convention and being asked by a lady, “Well, Doctor, what have we got?” Franklin’s memorable answer: “A Republic, madam, if you can keep it.” Inculcating young Americans in the new democratic civic religion, the Founders believed, was the best way to “keep the Republic” and preserve it from “factions,” voters who cared only about their own groups’ narrow interests. Schools needed to help create virtuous, civic-minded, and knowledgeable citizens—and the best way for them to do that was to teach the same grade-by-grade curriculum to each child. “The school would be the institution that would transform future citizens into loyal Americans,” Hirsch writes. “It would teach common knowledge, virtues, ideals, language, and commitments.”

Hirsch’s description of the Founders’ educational views is both reverential and elegiac. Most American leaders, well into the nineteenth century, believed passionately that schools’ main task was “the making of Americans,” Hirsch writes. He refers here not only to the millions of European immigrants arriving throughout the nineteenth century but also to native-born Americans from different regions and religions, who needed common schools as the means of acculturation into the “common language community” of a still-new country.

Lincoln’s famous Lyceum speech of 1838, Hirsch notes, was primarily about common schooling and shared knowledge as democratic touchstones. In the speech, Lincoln assigned schools the task of teaching the American credo of “solidarity, freedom, and civic peace above all other principles.” Let these principles, Lincoln said, “be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges—let it be written in Primmers [sic], spelling books and almanacs.” These beliefs were already reaching young Americans through Noah Webster’s grammars and dictionaries and William McGuffey’s readers.

After Hirsch has memorialized early American education, you can almost hear his remorse as he surveys what passes for higher thinking today in the education schools and teachers’ organizations. In *The Making of Americans*, Hirsch again shows how consensus science proves that “a higher-order academic skill such as reading comprehension requires prior knowledge of domain-specific content.” But the ed schools’ closed “thoughtworld” (Hirsch’s term) has

insulated itself from science. For that matter, future classroom teachers must search far in ed-school syllabi to find a single reference to any of Hirsch's work—yet required readings by radical education thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, and ex-Weatherman Bill Ayers are common. From these texts, prospective teachers will learn that the purpose of schooling in America isn't to create knowledgeable, civic-minded citizens, loyal to the nation's democratic institutions, as Jefferson dreamed, but rather to undermine those institutions and turn children into champions of "social justice" as defined by today's America-hating far Left.

Hirsch's theories, long merely persuasive, now have solid empirical backing in Massachusetts's miraculous educational reforms. Before the state passed its reform legislation, school districts employed a hodgepodge of instructional approaches, had no standard curriculum, and neglected academic content. But one element of the 1993 Education Reform Act was Hirschean knowledge-based curricula for each grade. The history and social-science curriculum, for instance, makes clear that students should be taught explicitly about their rich heritage, rather than taught how to learn about that heritage. The curriculum calls for schools to "impart to their students the learning necessary for an informed, reasoned allegiance to the ideals of a free society." This learning includes "the vision of a common life in liberty, justice, and equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution two centuries ago." Why is this essential? "We are convinced that democracy's survival depends upon our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans. It also depends on a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfill that vision."

In the new millennium, Massachusetts students have surged upward on the biennial National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—"the nation's report card," as education scholars call it. On the 2005 NAEP tests, Massachusetts ranked first in the nation in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and fourth- and eighth-grade math. It then repeated the feat in 2007. No state had ever scored first in both grades and both subjects in a single year—let alone for two consecutive test cycles. On another reliable test, the Trends in International Math and Science Studies, the state's fourth-graders last year ranked second globally in science and third in math, while the eighth-graders tied for first in science and placed sixth in math. (States can volunteer, as Massachusetts did, to have their students compared with national averages.) The United States as a whole finished tenth.

In fact, in the quarter-century since *A Nation at Risk* and the first edition of *Cultural Literacy*, the academic performance of American students has continued to lag behind most of the developed world. SAT scores are up slightly in math but remain flat in reading. With the notable exception of Massachusetts, NAEP reading scores are also flat in most states. According to the ACT administrators, under one-quarter of high school graduates taking the 2009 test were "college ready."

It is hard to imagine that our students, particularly in grades 3–8, wouldn't have done much better if the schools had adopted the Hirsch solution of a content-rich, grade-by-grade

curriculum and recognized that the way for students to achieve advanced reading comprehension is to master a broad range of background knowledge. By now, it should be evident that teaching children in the early grades “*how* to learn about the Civil War” will not necessarily lead them ever to learn about the Civil War—or about any of the other pivotal events in their country’s history.

The most hopeful alternative to dead-end progressive education is still to be found in Charlottesville. The national headquarters of the Core Knowledge Foundation is located a block or two from the University of Virginia in a sprawling, two-story residential house with a wraparound porch. A staff of about 25 people is working on a new K–3 reading program and bringing the Core Knowledge K–8 curriculum up to date with the latest relevant subject matter. The staff also maintains contact with a network of about 1,000 Core Knowledge schools around the country (many of them charters).

Some Core Knowledge supporters have urged Hirsch to move the foundation 100 miles northeast, to the nation’s capital. After all, Washington is the main battleground of school reform, where all the other big-time education organizations—the two national teachers’ unions, the professional teachers’ organizations, the AERA, the education think tanks—are located, so that they can lobby Congress and sell their wares to federal education officials. But Hirsch is an American original and an incurable optimist. Not only does he trust that if you build a better mousetrap, the world will come to your door; he thinks that it’s appropriate that his foundation should remain near the college that was Jefferson’s greatest education creation.

Perhaps the time isn’t too far off when Hirsch’s optimism will be vindicated. There’s a tantalizing hint of that possibility on the dust jacket of *The Making of Americans*. Original Core Knowledge supporter Diane Ravitch offers praise for the book, but two of the other blurbers are more surprising: Randi Weingarten, the newly installed president of the million-member American Federation of Teachers, and Joel Klein, chancellor of the nation’s largest school district. Usually, you hear those two names spoken in the same breath only when they’re in contention. Last month, moreover, Klein unfurled the results of a study that compared ten city schools using the Core Knowledge reading program with schools using other curricula. The Core Knowledge kids achieved progress at a rate that was “more than five times greater,” Klein said, heaping praise on the program.

The problem is that Core Knowledge programs are still in only a handful of schools in New York City, while how-to programs straight out of Teachers College are in about 700. Let Klein and Weingarten jointly decide that this ratio should be reversed, and it will be the beginning of a new era in school reform. It will also be a fitting testament to America’s most important education reformer of the last century.

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