

Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality, by Charles Murray. New York: Crown Forum, 224 pp., \$24.95 hardbound.

Education Unbound

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Real Education is not so much a systematic study as a collection of essays presenting four truths about American education today. First, Charles Murray argues that while academic ability varies, few students are really exceptional in one area but not in another; so a child who knows the answers in math class is probably reading above grade level as well. Thus, aco-babble about “multiple

intelligences” and the like are costly and misleading—they make elementary and high school education more complicated than it really is.

Second, he asserts that many children cannot learn more than rudimentary math and reading, that our educational system must recognize this, and—rather than spend millions of dollars to push a math score up a few points—that we should instead prepare these students for trades in which they can prosper. Here he is advocating the European model.

In his most controversial essay, Murray asserts that too many students are going to college. This, of course, is a direct attack on the education industry, whose state budgets depend on their ability to balloon both their enrollment and their course offerings. Universities always want more, and in an economy that is no longer flush with cash, this argument should get a good hearing. Murray's off-set for the mania to get a college degree is to encourage a CPA-style examination for various trades, which, in addition to being much cheaper, would focus on knowledge and achievement rather than the vague status of a BA. In addition, the testing alternative allows outsiders—the employers of students—to register their vote in the educational battles.

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Murray's fourth chapter "America's Future Depends on How We Educate the Academically Gifted," addresses a serious issue, but I find his argument here to be his weakest.

People generally mean one of two things when they talk about education. One is the practical education for a trade and the other is a humanistic, classical, or moral education. The first of these can be traced back to Francis Bacon ("The Advancement of Learning"), who did not want formal education to deal with "those books of personal improvement that men can read at their leisure," but instead "really to instruct and suborn action and active life, these Georgics of the mind, concerning the husbandry and tillage thereof." Bacon believed that learning should perfect the technical skills a person needs for his professed vocation. And since such individuals by definition must lead an active life, he believed that too much concern with contemplation would have a negative influence. Bacon is scolding when he writes, "most of the doctrines of the philosophers are more fearful and cautionary than the nature of things requireth."

At the extreme opposite end of the spectrum we have John Milton ("Of Education"), who concludes simply and bluntly, "The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to

know God aright..." Both men were superb Latinists, scholars of the highest order, so I suspect they both would be horrified by what now passes as a liberal education.

American education today is fighting two battles; the first is between trade schools and the humanities. Within the trade school universe the objective is to be better prepared for a profession, and this takes up most of the money and energy on most university campuses today. Humanities are losing ground, so they have joined the trend by pointing their students toward graduate schools and the law.

The second battle is being fought within the humanities—a very large tempest in a rapidly shrinking teapot—and it pits the prevailing politically liberal anti-religion majority against a tiny band of traditionalists and classicists, most of whom are sympathetic toward what is generally called a "core curriculum," as well as toward other standbys like the study of foreign and classical languages, or an unapologetic respect for America and its history. Most of their allies are outside the university system, but there are precious few of these too.

American education's greatest failure is that our schools have not been able to make good citizens out of ordinary students. This has happened

because the educational establishment does not hold the same values regarding good citizenship as most of mainstream America. William Buckley described all this in *God and Man at Yale*, published over fifty years ago. Most educators assume they are taking the moral high road, and this requires that they seek reform, not reinforcement of what the political Right considers to be traditional values. In this sense, professional educators are similar to judges who legislate from the bench.

Another problem is that these reforming educators regularly change their objectives—to keep up with the times, they would say. New math, whole word recognition reading and spelling, and directing students away from books to visual images, the computer, and the Internet have all corroded simple reading, writing, and problem solving skills. The devaluation of books and long reading assignments reduces the need for a student to develop a longer attention span, without which no real learning can take place.

Murray's way to attack this problem is to identify those academically gifted students with IQs of around 120 or higher, and train them to be wise, not just smart. These ubiquitous elite include captains of industry, lawyers and judges, national journalists, Hollywood filmmakers,

and university faculties, as well as a large number of housewives who lead philanthropic and political activities in their communities. But why is this program for the academic elite alone?

Wisdom is at the grasp of all sane men—it has nothing to do with IQ. Many a humble person does not know how to write for this publication but is yet wise. Beyond wisdom there is virtue, which is a habitual disposition to do good. Wisdom contributes to virtue, but it is virtue that leads to the good life and, ultimately, to happiness, which is the greatest good.

With all Murray's writhing about Great Books and the important questions of life, he, and most other educational reformers, fails to recognize that these questions have already been met most widely and satisfactorily by the major organized religions. Why, when he mentions the four cardinal virtues, does Murray omit the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity? Why is the Hebrew Bible off-limits for him? Proverbs addresses Murray's issue quite clearly: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." There's one answer for you. Even the Greeks that Murray so admires knew that lesson: Odysseus was constantly making sacrifices to the gods to protect and shelter him.

Colleges and high schools are not proselytizing when they teach *The Divine Comedy*, Augustine's *Confessions*, *Paradise Lost*, or the book of Exodus. These works have been studied, translated, and admired by thousands of believers and nonbelievers for centuries. Further, we must not forget that religion is uniquely democratic—it offers the highest intellects the greatest mental challenges, while at the same time it can satisfy the needs of the poor and illiterate. Nonetheless, to hope for a classical, intellectual, and cultural revival without some religious impetus is not realistic; it is just one more elitist dream.

Further, Murray seems unaware of the power of the forces opposed to him. He hopes that a core curriculum will simply appear one day, because “the stuff of a liberal education is truly wonderful.”

I don't believe him. Shakespeare will endure forever, but Harold Bloom's prediction of a decade ago is proving correct: in most colleges Shakespeare has been relegated to a rare elective in a literature department given over to cultural studies. Shakespeare's goodness alone—his judgment, his conventional piety combined with his realistic understanding of mankind—has not been enough. He has survived, but not in the university.

Murray must realize that he will have a battle on his hands. If he wants a sample of what kind of passion and intellectual intensity it will take, I recommend that he read Camile Paglia, perhaps her eighty-page diatribe, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders.” She closes this essay by comparing the educational establishment with Penelope's suitors, all of whom were slaughtered by Odysseus. That's calling for one hell of a house cleaning.

I would have been much happier with Murray if he had shown a bit more moral outrage over the death of reading. It is indeed tragic that teachers have come to expect so little from their students. Murray might have reminded us that the practice of real virtues, let's start with courage—scarce amid our many spoiled elites—will be necessary to change educational policies. Lobbing beautiful theories from think tanks won't do the trick.

I return to Harold Bloom, who in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* expresses the frustration so many of us feel: “Reading alone will not save us or make us wise, but without it we will lapse into the death-in-life of the dumbing down in which America now leads the world, as in all other matters.”

On a much lighter note, much of *Real Education* is just plain fun;

Murray does get his licks in. For example, while he has noticed that college education is not all that it's cracked up to be, he is annoyed that the parents of today's students are still buying the party line. "When it comes to shopping for colleges," Murray writes, "many parents of America's brightest students—disproportionately affluent and well-educated themselves—act like drugged-up pop stars on Rodeo Drive. They buy brand name without checking quality..." I think he got a kick out of writing that.

To return to serious issues, Murray points out that the school choice movement is the most important force for good in K–12 education. He is on solid ground here, because most Americans agree with him. Indeed, syndicated columnist Juan Williams believes that school choice is *the* civil rights issue of our day. The trick here is not saying this, because most of us know it, but figuring out how to bring it about.

Finally, I would argue that Murray's battle against the prestige-granting status of universities—while noble in theory—seems to be wildly quixotic. Tom Wolfe, a great

authority on the power of status, wrote a blurb promoting Murray's book and was the subject of a lengthy interview with *Academic Questions*. Status, Wolfe said in that interview, "is everything. It's the key to understanding everything humans do....Even in *The Right Stuff*...The real subject is status competition within the small, enclosed world of military flying. That is what drove the first seven astronauts and most of the first seventy-two astronauts."

Universities will not surrender their position easily. Generous alumni need Princeton's recognition more than Princeton needs them. The poor scholarship student who can leapfrog from the ghetto to this modern version of the Garden of Eden sees no reason to change things now. The degree-granting industry—what we call universities—has billions of dollars to defend its claims as America's most elite club.

Universities *are* about status, and it is a game they are winning. Reordering the curriculum and saving the humanities will be difficult enough. Perhaps fighting the status battle can be put off for another day.