

Thought leadership

The promise of intellectual joy

By [Steven F. Wilson](#) June 4, 2019



From their inception, America’s public schools have reflected our nation’s entrenched anti-intellectualism: a hostility to ideas and a deprecation of knowledge for its own sake. America celebrated hardy, masculine practicality and common sense.

For much of the 19th century, an academic education—especially contemplative or imaginative study—was depicted as morally corrupt, the indulgence of European aristocrats. In the 20th, educators sought to limit access to a liberal arts education, the education long afforded the privileged, while claiming to democratize education. Today, liberal education is under fresh attack, this time as “whiteness.” And through it all, we have accepted that for most, schooling will be drudgery: an act of discipline in service of college and career.

We are trapped in a paradox. Our democratic ideals insist that all children be educated, yet richly academic study and its satisfactions, enduringly associated with an elite class, is scorned.

It is time to stop depriving young people of their most potent incentive to learn and excel—the experience of intellectual joy.

We readily accept that nearly every child can experience both the exertion and pleasures of sport, or the joy of making music that follows diligent practice, though only a few will have the rare talents to make sport or music their career. The training of the mind need be no different. While only a few students will go on to become professional “intellectuals,” *every* student can experience the satisfactions of their intellect: the heady delight in connecting ideas, the pleasure of the imagination, and the reward that follows mental struggle. And just as students venerate the most accomplished athletes and musicians, *all* students can be inspired by and take pleasure in the achievements of great minds.

I think of a friend who teaches a self-contained special education class for third to fifth graders who read at a kindergarten level. Every day they make rich connections. One student, eyes shining brightly, proudly explained to her teacher the spheres of the earth—the hydrosphere, geosphere, biosphere, and atmosphere—and their interactions. I think too of a fifth-grade teacher at Ascend whose class I observed one morning. His students handily unpacked Dorothy Parker’s poem *Penelope*, a sly feminist take on the *Odyssey*; later, the animated classroom discussion spilled over into recess as students debated equal pay for men and women.

These experiences should be commonplace in schools, but they remain the exception.

In the 19th century common school, American heroes like George Washington were depicted as sincere, self-made men with little use for intellectual life: “He was more solid than brilliant, and had more judgment than genius. He had great dread of public life, cared little for books, and possessed no library,” said one history book. Horace Mann and other proponents of mass education were careful not to stress the development of the mind or pride in learning for its own sake, but instead its economic and political benefits. To the wealthy (who resisted paying for the schools) they claimed a bulwark against public disorder and radicalism; to the lower classes, the door to opportunity. “The value of developing the mind for intellectual or imaginative achievement or even contemplative enjoyment was considerably less clear and less subject to common agreement,” Richard Hofstadter wrote in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. “Many Americans were troubled by the suspicion that an education of this kind was suitable only to the leisured classes, to aristocracies, to the European past; that its usefulness was less evident than its possible dangers; that an undue concern with the development of the mind was a form of

arrogance or narcissism which one would expect to find mainly in the morally corrupt.” American educators prided themselves on utility; creative intellect was scorned as European folly. “Man’s intellect,” one writer said, “is not man’s sole nor best adorning.”

Yet at the close of the century, Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard, chaired an influential committee that held that the goal of secondary school—at the time attended by fewer than nine percent of high-school age students—should be to develop students’ minds through the teaching of academic subjects. The committee [recognized](#) that only a small portion of students were bound for college but urged all the same that “every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil.” Training “the powers of observation, memory, expression, and reasoning” would prepare students equally for “the duties of life” as for college. In a democratic society, such an education would grant *all* students the knowledge and faculties of mind that had once only been afforded the elite. “We Americans,” he wrote in 1892, “habitually underestimate the capacity of pupils at almost every stage of education.” He was right.

But the commitment to liberal education was not to last. In the 20th century, anti-intellectualism was fueled by educational progressivism. John Dewey’s theories, first advanced in *My Pedagogic Creed* in 1897, quickly came to define pedagogy in America and have enchanted prospective teachers in schools of education for generations. Dewey rightly decried traditional teaching—its reliance on rote learning, domineering teachers, and passive students—and sought to engage the interests of children, develop their capacity for expression, and respond to their need for activity. “The freshness of youth can be faded and its vivid curiosities dulled,” he wrote, with teachers’ “insolent coercions, insinuating briberies, and pedagogic solemnities.” But as Hofstadter has noted, his exceptionally vague and plastic prose concealed important problems in conception. Inspired by Rousseau and Emerson, Dewey urged teachers to make the child the center of the school, to respond to his or her natural impulses toward learning which would be profane to violate. But how should the teacher guide the child, while ensuring a rigorous course of study? Dewey’s experimental work centered on very young children; how would his admonitions apply to the advanced grades? Here Dewey was silent. The unintended effect was to dissolve the curriculum. As his ideas became national creed, educators invoked Dewey to justify a repudiation of liberal education and the denigration of academic teaching. Dewey lamented the perversion of his ideas, but his subsequent elaboration of them over forty years proved largely futile.

Beginning in the 1920s, in a largely forgotten chapter of American education whose effects linger today, the “life adjustment movement” remade the American school. Responding to the tidal wave of immigrant children, the new educational administrators invoked educational and psychological pseudoscience to undermine liberal education. Sixty percent of students, the

movement's advocates asserted, were suited neither to college nor skilled occupations. Elitists might cater to the handful of students destined for college, but a commitment to democratic values required new methods that would meet the needs of the intellectually mediocre.

Backed by the United States Office of Education, the life educators denounced lingering “college standards” in high schools and teachers with only “academic viewpoints.” “Business arithmetic is superior to ... geometry; learning ways of keeping physically fit, to the study of French; learning the technique of selecting an occupation, to the study of algebra; ... simple business English, to Elizabethan Classics,” Charles Prosser argued. The proportion of academic courses in high school fell from about three-quarters in 1910 to about one-fifth forty years later. Life adjustment was a philosophy of education, as the US Commissioner of Education put it, “which places life values above acquisition of knowledge.” To educate “the whole child,” high schools should “adjust” students for life by focusing on topics like, “How can I keep well? How can I look my best? How can I get along better with others?,” a dean of education at John Hopkins averred in an article, “The Real Barrier to a More Realistic Curriculum.” In 1950, students in grades 7 through 10 in one New York community were required to learn “my duties as a baby sitter,” “what can be done about acne,” and “learning to care for my bedroom.” Teachers were essentially absolved of their responsibility to educate. And as Hofstadter put it, “American educators entered upon a crusade to exalt the academically uninterested or ungifted into a kind of culture-hero.”

For a movement so focused on children's satisfaction in life—on consumption, hobbies, sociability, and personal style—it is striking that intellectual joy and pleasure in achievement were utterly absent.

In the conformist 50s, McCarthy's crusade against communism ensnared university professors, writers, and the creative class. Columnist Stewart Alsop popularized the term “eggheads,” intellectuals whom he associated with the supporters of the effete (“fruity”) and educated Adlai Stevenson, Dwight Eisenhower's Democratic opponent. Eisenhower himself said in 1954, “We [have] had so many wisecracking so-called intellectuals going around and showing how wrong was everybody who don't happen to agree with them. By the way, I heard a definition of an intellectual that I thought was very interesting: a man who takes more words than are necessary to tell more than he knows.” It's painfully easy to link this inheritance to our post-truth era.

Sputnik alarmed Americans that the nation had fallen dangerously behind in science and technology, marking the end of the life adjustment movement, but educational progressivism and its anti-academic tenets continued to hold sway through the 1970s.

Children from disadvantage were the greatest victims. Tragically, civil rights advocates inadvertently exacerbated the tendency to exclude children of color in underserved communities from academic schooling in two ways. First, the essential focus on equitable *access* of the 1970s and 1980s (including court-ordered desegregation and bilingual and special education programs), while imperative to expanding educational opportunity and addressing discrimination, came at the expense of a focus on *quality*. During this period, the leadership teams of big-city school systems were rightly engaged with the new civil rights mandates, but educational standards were often virtually nonexistent. Second, as Tom Toch has noted, civil rights activists were concerned that requiring students of color to undertake demanding academic work would discriminate against children already harmed by prejudicial treatment in other aspects of their lives. Presaging the present-day press for “culturally responsive curriculum,” schools instead engaged the “cultural” characteristics of their children. As one advocate, Frank Reissman, wrote, “It would be easy to say ... that we must give these children what middle-class parents give their children—we must stimulate them in the use of language through reading, discussion, and the like. However, it is probable that this would not work nor would it make the best use of the deprived child’s particular mode of functioning.” Schools, he said, should “stress the visual, the physical, the active.”

The educational “excellence” movement of the 80s and 90s, with its determinedly academic vision and insistence on a high level of intellectual training for all, was an essential corrective. Critics, however, charged that such efforts were “elitist.” Ensnared in the culture wars, E. D. Hirsch and other advocates of exposing students to a vast domain of cultural inheritance were attacked as “cultural imperialists,” even though Hirsch was at pains to emphasize that this inheritance was multicultural and forever evolving. Teaching reading comprehension “skills” in the absence of such exposure, Hirsch argued, was a doomed project; it is the accretion of facts and ideas that enable children to make meaning of complex texts—and, one might add, what empowers them to escape poverty and dependency. Yet Hirsch continues to this day to be pilloried by educators for his entirely sensible proposal that *all* children be systematically afforded the essential knowledge that has benefited the privileged.

Born of the educational excellence movement, the drive for academic standards and accountability has undeniably increased academic rigor over the last quarter century. The first wave of states’ standards and corresponding assessments, coopted by educators who substituted soft competencies like “learning to work in groups” for rigorous academic skills, were in most states dismayingly weak. But the subsequent Common Core standards and assessments were not. The kind of intellectual performance required to do well on the Common Core exams now closely resembles the intellectual capacity good schools have always aimed to build in their students—the ability to unlock challenging texts from an early age and develop a deep

conceptual understanding of mathematics. Regrettably, in many states, governors capitulated to anti-testing forces and retreated from the Core. But where they held their ground and schools embraced the Core's ambitious expectations, children are being successfully prepared in unprecedented numbers for college-level work. They readily rose to the new expectations.

While the standards movement, where it survived, has promoted academic rigor, it has not on balance fostered intellectual *delight*, depriving educators of the most potent means to engage students. Schools erred in devoting excessive time to tedious test preparation, resented by students and teachers alike. The imperative to perform well in the tested subjects of math and English narrowed the curriculum, which testing critics have rightly condemned. It was shortsighted to deny time and attention to science, history, and the arts; the sparks that fly when students discover connections across the disciplines were extinguished. And most importantly, teaching was overwhelmed by academic procedure; when teachers labor to adhere to pedagogical formula, there is little space left for zesty exploration of ideas and meaning.

Just as schools are organizing to overcome these challenges, they face a new threat to intellectual engagement. As schools strive to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive and to ensure culturally responsive teaching, there is the growing risk that these imperatives will be shamefully exploited to justify reduced intellectual expectations of students. One document widely used in diversity workshops, including in the training of all New York City administrators and principals identifies 13 “damaging characteristics of white supremacy culture.” One is “objectivity,” which is manifested as “the belief that there is such a thing as being objective” and “requiring people to think in a linear way.” Anti-intellectualism often takes the position that there are only subjective perspectives. Another is the “worship of the written word,” whereby “those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued.” The document sensibly calls for other capacities to be valued, including “the ability to build relationships.” But how tragic it would be if any child was taught that a reverence for the written word was a *white* characteristic. What would they make of Frederic Douglass's *Fourth of July* speech, Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, or James Baldwin's letter to his nephew, “My Dungeon Shook” in *The Fire Next Time*? As writers, they were deeply learned and dazzling stylists. Their words explode on the page, inspiring millions in the urgent work of racial justice. It's hard to imagine a more destructive message to teachers and their students. This too will surely come to be seen as another wrong turn on the way to equal educational opportunity.

A few years back, I had the opportunity at a closed-door conference to obtain candid advice from a small group of distinguished leaders in school reform on a “problem of practice.” I chose to discuss the [teaching fellowship](#) for new college graduates that Ascend was launching. The program's goal, I explained, was to attract aspiring teachers who had lively intellectual interests themselves and had been fortunate to have experienced a college culture that venerated learning

and celebrated ideas. In turn, and with intensive training, these teachers could recreate an environment of animated curiosity in their own classrooms.

As the discussion began, nearly every respondent distanced themselves from the idea. One participant said, “when we use the word intellectual, it has a connotation. Intellectual speaks to colonized and oppressed. You will need to redefine the term.” Another said, “Let’s focus on *rigor* instead.” Someone said that “intellectual curiosity” might be an acceptable term, but not “intellectualism.” “Let’s use the term ‘geek out’,” another offered.

Yet the moment the hour was over several of the same respondents approached me privately to express their enthusiasm for the initiative. One said that “what you want to do is good and right.” I told one woman that her comments about imperialism and colonization were interesting. She replied, “Oh, *don’t think about that*. It’s brave and bold what you are planning to do.” She slipped me a piece of paper on which she had sketched a diagram. On the left was “the archetype of intellectual: white, elite bookworms in smoking chairs with pipes.” On the right she wrote, “The *new* intellectual in a new sociocultural context could be *any* individual who expresses a curiosity and a joy for learning.”

How can we expect students to love what we disdain?

It’s time for intellectual passion to come out of the closet. Achievement, as measured by scores on standardized tests, is vitally important. But if we are to create truly *excellentschools*, we must overcome our lingering disdain for intellectual accomplishment—and welcome all students to experience its satisfactions. Let’s start by dropping terms like “geeking out” that, in mocking a love of ideas, reveal our own ambivalence as educators.

“Anti-intellectualism,” Hofstadter wrote, “is founded in the democratic institutions and the egalitarian sentiments of this country. The intellectual class, whether or not it enjoys many of the privileges of an elite, is of necessity an elite in its manner of thinking and functioning.” But so long as our culture continues to identify intellectual pursuit—and especially intellectual joy—with elitism, children not born to privilege will never experience school for what it can and must be: a great intellectual adventure. The distinctly American project of equal opportunity will continue to be thwarted.

I would love to hear your questions or comments: email me at steven.wilson@ascendlearning.org.