



WHAT SHOULD  
**PERSONAL  
RESPONSIBILITY**  
IN EDUCATION MEAN?

A SYMPOSIUM COMPILED  
& WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY MITCH PEARLSTEIN

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# What Should Personal Responsibility in Education Mean?

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## INTRODUCTION

How and why is there so little political, journalistic, and scholarly recognition in the United States that all the education reform plans in the world won't make much difference if American students don't work reasonably hard and do their homework?

I don't recall exactly when I first framed the question this way, but I do recall the research findings that got me thinking more explicitly about the way in which insufficient student effort posed a huge obstacle to academic achievement, especially in K-12. It was a study led by Prof. Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, released in 1983 or '84, showing how mothers in Japan and Taiwan were more likely than mothers in the United States to attribute their children's academic success (or lack thereof) to effort. Whereas American mothers were more likely to attribute academic victories to cognitive talent—to how inherently equipped, or not so equipped their kids were—perhaps particularly in math.

As soon as I read a *New York Times* summary of Stevenson's findings, I realized that so long

as so many students elsewhere around the world were encouraged and pressed by parents who embraced academic effort and sweat as cultural imperatives, the United States had zero chance of educationally catching up with key nations, particularly in Asia.

Jump ahead a half-dozen years to 1990, and Stevenson was a featured speaker at an all-day American Experiment conference with the depressing but not unfounded title, "What Do We Do When School Reform Fails?" The late Professor Stevenson, who once taught at the University of Minnesota, was one of the most influential education scholars in the second half of the 20th century. Of additional local interest, the American kids sampled in the 1983 study were from the Twin Cities.

Jump ahead another 30 years, to 2020, and Professor Stevenson's insights are once again a spur, this time for the symposium that follows, featuring 36 essays, written by 40 diverse men and women from across Minnesota and the nation: *What Should Personal Responsibility in Education Mean?* It's a project grounded in concerns and questions such as:



- Do we demand too little of parents in getting their kids to work hard?
- Do we demand too little of kids themselves?
- How and why is there more emphasis on social impediments such as poverty and racism than on other factors such as family fragmentation and the effects of a “therapeutic culture”?
- Similarly, how and why is there a frequent assumption that young people are fragile and vulnerable when it comes to dealing with poverty and racism but strong and resilient when it comes to dealing with divorce and single parenthood?
- What’s the role of sometimes run-amok progressive explanations for poor performance?
- What’s the role of sometimes run-amok conservative individualism?
- When it comes to undermining personal responsibility, what’s the role of hyper-celebrations of self-esteem?
- What’s the role of discipline policies in which all groups are assumed to misbehave similarly?
- Putting matters positively, how can we most effectively increase grit in American students?

For reasons of space, what follows are excerpts from only a dozen of the essays. As to be expected, the role of parents and families is discussed throughout and from a variety of perspectives. Jason Adkins, for instance, writes of how “parents are stewards of the gift of life entrusted to them by God. One would think,” he continues, “this truth is so obvious that it need not even be stated. Yet, looking around at the cultural, educational, and political landscape, it is a truth that is being forgotten, especially by parents.”

A few moments later he begins to conclude: “We need to empower parents and remind them of their great role. Some parents are waiting to be called to higher things, and people who see the problems in the culture need to be on the front lines giving parents the tools to succeed, if parents are willing to receive them.” Jason Adkins is executive director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference.

Geoffrey Maruyama is a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Writing with Katherine Galligan, he says, “Parents have been called ‘helicopter parents,’ ‘Tiger Moms,’ and coddlers. One result of this heightened protective parenting is youth and children who are less independent, who take less initiative, who are less demanding of themselves in work and study, and who may therefore expect to succeed regardless of how they behave.”

So, what might adult policymakers and practitioners do? One thing Maruyama and Galligan suggest is, “create responsibility in children and youth by encouraging them to rely first on themselves to solve and address their

**I realized that so long as so many students elsewhere around the world were encouraged and pressed by parents who embraced academic effort and sweat as cultural imperatives, the United States had zero chance of educationally catching up with key nations, particularly in Asia.**

challenges. Research on learning and feedback has shown that we can learn more from our failures, for a mind that always gets what it expects is not forced to reflect and change.” Or, “in language taken from a Native American proverb,” they write, we need to “prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.”

This is not to suggest, it goes without saying, that Maruyama and Galligan believe little should be done to even out playing fields, or that we should not be alert to wildly divergent student backgrounds. A textured argument for such an appreciation is Mark Gordon’s. Gordon, a professor and former president of the Mitchell Hamline School of Law, asks, “Why shouldn’t we expect students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be more diligent and just work harder? I think

the problem is not that we expect too little of these students, but rather that we offer them too little support. . . . Why have we structured our institutions and expectations to coincide with the life experiences of the more privileged? Why do we assume that the kinds of support that are built into our current practices and institutions are somehow the appropriate default setting and that other kinds of support represent something extra?"

Instead of wondering, Gordon finishes off, "why underperforming students are not working as hard as others, why don't we ask instead: What can our schools and institutions of higher education do to provide support and accommodation that will help all students excel in the classroom?"

As is known by anyone versed in current interpretations about how and why American education is allegedly unsupportive and biased against low-income students and students of color, Gordon's take on the matter, pointed as it may be, is much too mild for many critics. Severe indictments about the supposed unfairness of American schooling are longstanding, of course, and not just a "woke" manifestation. I recall one of the first times I came upon revisionist scholars who argued that not only was trapping certain individuals and groups in their place the *effect* of American public education, it was its very *purpose*.

Suffice it to say, I vigorously differed then and still. Yet without attributing such extreme accusations to two Minnesota educators, I do appreciate how their essays reflect a harsh, though not rare view about inclusivity and fairness in American education. Chong Thao is a veteran high school English teacher in St. Paul. Shawn Yates is a superintendent of a public school district in Minnesota.

Thao writes of how the "historical reality is that the relationship between society and the individual has been forged not in love but power, where society has played the paternalistic role of a bad parent, favoring some children, while neglecting

and even abusing others." She describes it as "white hegemony." The "great scholarly tradition" of schools "has centered on white dominant culture—where logic, philosophy, art, rhetoric, and history favor white European traditions and values and everything else is superstitious, irrational, other."

Not dissimilarly, Yates contends that the term "personal responsibility" is one that "many privileged members of society coopt to point fingers of blame in an attempt to remove themselves from their own culpability and moral accountability." And a few paragraphs later: "Through implicit bias, children are frequently misdiagnosed as lazy or unmotivated when in reality the witnessed behaviors may be tied to factors inherent with poverty or racial disparity."

Where might ideas like these originate?

"Higher education in the United States today," Laurence Cooper, a political science professor at Carleton, suggests, "has more than a little in common with Las Vegas." But there also are "important differences, beginning with this one: Unlike Las Vegas, what happens in the universities doesn't stay in the universities. Ideas and opinions nurtured there have a way of seeping into the culture at large, particularly secondary education."

Todd Flanders, headmaster of Providence Academy in Plymouth, has a significantly different view about universal standards and their adherence than do those with dark views about American education. "From student discipline to student achievement," he writes, "the impact of an ideology presumably intended to benefit minorities has precisely the opposite effect. Lowering behavioral and academic expectations in an effort to reduce disparate impacts results in worse behavior and less achievement. . . ."

"In the name of 'anti-racism,'" Flanders continues, "the new ideology is not only promoting soft bigotry but perpetuating new forms of oppression. When personal responsibility in education is

removed from minority students (or any students), how could one expect growth in achievement and responsibility?”

How might conflicting dynamics not unlike these play out in the academy? David Weerts is a professor in the higher education administration track in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. A majority of his colleagues, he writes, view an emphasis on getting “students to buckle down, integrate into the learning community, and get up to speed with the rigors of academic life” as a “dog-whistle signaling who belongs in college and who doesn’t. As gaps in college preparedness across racial and ethnic groups persist, these discussions often take on racial overtones.”

Weerts acknowledges that “we are in a challenging new era of academia,” with that new reality requiring us “to act charitably and in ways that demonstrate care and support for our students.” But no less, he adds “in a manner that builds faith in the academy as a place where disciplined inquiry can flourish.”

Changing vantages, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute argues in his essay how a “decline in religiosity across the country may also have played an indirect and incalculable role in creating headwinds against habits necessary for achievement—not least because convinced adherents from the Judeo-Christian tradition understand in their bones that they are personally accountable to the Creator for what they do and fail to do.” But lest one think his view parochial, Eberstadt finishes off this way:

“So, here is one suggestion for making it a little easier for kids today to fall into habits of mind and habits of behavior that will help them succeed in life: Ask what our immigrant parents are doing right with their kids. Figure out what it is. Then let those parents be an example for the rest of us. The United States has a lot to learn from its very newest Americans: If we let them, they can teach us how to help our children thrive.”

But what about reconceiving, not just attitudes and behaviors, but public policy to better foster personal responsibility? Bob Wedl, a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education, has several suggestions, including a novel way to “get more from students”; one that’s in concert with American Experiment’s well-received project, “Great Jobs Without a Four-Year Degree.” Many high school students, Wedl argues, “would excel in technical fields leading to jobs that pay north of \$40,000. What if we personalized the graduation standards instead of requiring all students to meet the same standards regardless of their aspirations and needs? . . . Why not grant a high school diploma when a student has attained a career certification or begins an apprenticeship or completes an AA degree or even a year of college,” demonstrating they are “career ready?”

Bob Wedl’s approach is consonant in spirit with Jon Bacal’s. “The way we educate high school youth,” Jon writes, “is boring, demotivating, obsolete, and demands reinvention. Disengagement is a rational response to a system designed a century ago for a nation that sought to prepare factory workers, not creative artisans, innovators, entrepreneurs, and change agents. That nation no longer exists. The good news: We can redesign schools to inspire youth to produce quality work. That’s my takeaway from 25 years studying, starting, and leading schools and mentoring disengaged youth.”

Jon, who currently coaches Twin Cities Changemakers, founded and formerly led the acclaimed Venture Academy in Minneapolis. His contribution to the symposium is complemented by commentaries by Walter Cortina Martinez, a junior at the High School for Recording Arts, and Haben Ghebregish, who teaches math there. They also are involved with Twin Cities Changemakers.

Optimism is invaluable if our aim is improving education and more specifically reducing achievement gaps. But so is a hard sobriety. In her essay, Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan



Institute talks about how she is often asked, “What can we do to close that gap?” But she has come to conclude that’s the wrong question. “‘We’—meaning the society at large, filled with well-meaning adults who yearn to live in a post-racial society and want nothing more than racial equality in educational attainment—have been trying for decades to raise black performance through a dizzying array of costly initiatives, each issued with great fanfare. . . . At this point, there is very little that ‘we’ can do that hasn’t already been tried. The responsibility for closing the achievement gap now rests with the students themselves and their parents.”

Some might read Heather’s argument as an overly somber way of concluding an Introduction to a brilliant, often brighter-eyed symposium. But even for those who believe her view rayless, I would only point out, returning to the top, unless educational collaborations grow more potent and widespread among American parents and their children, young people will not learn nearly enough. This reaches far beyond narrower matters of achievement gaps and race.

My great thanks to the 40 men and women who have contributed to this symposium. Their eclectic attention to an aspect of education that’s usually attended to poorly in public is an important contribution and will serve, I would hope, to prompt breakthrough discussions about personal responsibility, in Minnesota especially.

It also has been my honor over the years to thank American Experiment members for making projects like this financially possible in the first place. As well as Peter Zeller for his superb job in helping me track down and invite talented men and women to write, and then take charge of production activities at the end. Kent Kaiser for copy editing so smooth and good that few writers ever complain. Scott Buchschacher for his always beautiful design work. American Experiment staffers, led by Catrin Wigfall, who graciously volunteer to proofread—or graciously allow themselves to be cornered into doing so.

And since she joined American Experiment after we released our last symposium, it’s my pleasure to thank Katie Fulkerson for promoting this one among journalists, business leaders, educators, parents, and many others all over Minnesota and beyond.

With that, my great thanks to everyone who has made it to the end of this abundant Introduction and who now plan on sporadically reading at least portions of the three dozen essays that follow. And as always, I welcome your thoughts.

*MBP*

*Eden Prairie, MN*

*February 2020*

## **PARENTS ARE THE STEWARDS OF THE GIFT OF LIFE**

*By Jason Adkins*

The Catholic Church affirms that parents are the first educators of their children, which means that they have the primary responsibility to oversee their child’s development. Put differently, parents are stewards of the gift of life entrusted to them by God.

One would think that this truth is so obvious that it need not even be stated. Yet, looking at the cultural, educational, and political landscape, it is a truth that is being forgotten, especially by parents.

Upholding parents’ duty and responsibility as primary educators helps us avoid two traps: first, that the education of our children is someone else’s job; second, that education is limited to what happens during the school day in a school building.

The role of parents in child development is clear early in a child’s life; children rely on parents for everything, especially survival. Parents’ responsibility includes introducing some of life’s most important lessons and providing the building blocks to be a virtuous, contributing member of society.

Increasingly, many parents seem to believe those responsibilities diminish once they put their child on the school bus. They are uncritical of the content presented to their children in school and often fail to probe whether the cookie-cutter factory model of education so prevalent in many schools is an environment where their own child, with his or her unique needs, can flourish.

Similarly, parents these days are often not willing to work with the child at home to help the child succeed or believe (wrongly) on the other extreme that lots of homework and other busywork necessarily constitute academic rigor.

Parents increasingly act as though they are customers who are always right, and they treat schools like a consumer product. When the product is not producing the desired result in their child, they refuse to consider that it could possibly be the child or parent's fault.

Putting the blame on educators is parents shirking their responsibilities. Yes, teachers and schools should be accountable because they sometimes make mistakes, but teachers can only do so much with a child—a lot depends on what happens at home and in the parent-child relationship.

Schools exist to support a parent as first educator, not to usurp the parent's responsibilities. Parents need to choose schools that will be their partners in the formation of the whole child.

Seeing education as someone else's job underscores the denuded understanding of education that seems to be prevailing today, namely, that education is about learning to acquire skills that will help one get a job in the real world.

Developing technical knowledge and skill is, in fact, a part of education. But true education is about the formation and development of the whole child, including the child's character. We need young people to grow into responsible adults who can have families of their own and make concrete contributions to the common good.

Many activists and educators understand the role schools play in formation, which is why aggressive ideological projects are promoted in some schools. There is a battle going on for the hearts and souls of young people, yet many parents are oblivious.

Parents should not expect schools to raise their children, believing they can pass off the responsibility of moral formation to the school. But it is incumbent on parents to find educational environments that reinforce their values. When, for exam-

**Some parents are waiting to be called to higher things, and people who see the problems in the culture need to be on front lines giving parents the tools to succeed, if parents are willing to receive them.**

ple, public schools assault those values, parents must make the sacrifices necessary to remove the child from that environment—for the sake of the child's soul.

Likewise, parents, believing that schools are imparting all the relevant knowledge, instead spend time indulging their kids' appetites and letting them live their lives through their cell phones, failing to continue education and formation outside the classroom.

It's not necessarily willful malice or neglect that leaves many parents impotent. They sometimes just don't know what to do themselves and are bewildered by what is going on around them. Coupled with their own lack of solid formation and not wanting to be hypocritical, parents continue to abdicate their responsibility to others, such as to the media and to the state.

We need to empower parents and remind them of their great role. Some parents are waiting to be called to higher things, and people who see the problems in the culture need to be on front lines giving parents the tools to succeed, if parents are willing to receive them.

We can't raise other people's kids. But if we hope to have a good future in which we must live with those kids, we must encourage and support parents as primary educators.

*Jason Adkins is executive director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference.*

## “WE CAN REDESIGN SCHOOLS TO INSPIRE YOUTH”

*By Walter Cortina Martinez, Haben Ghebregish, and Jon Bacal*

**Walter Cortina Martinez.** Early on, I learned it was very hard to balance life problems with staying focused on school. My severe challenges outside of school reduced my motivation for schoolwork. I was 13 when my single mother was deported to Mexico. In the years that followed, finding housing, food, and health care were constant struggles, along with working long hours to support myself and my family in Mexico. Meanwhile, aside from appointments with my social worker, my school seemed to care only about my grades and my understandably not very consistent attendance. An institution that was supposed to help me with my life and future just wasn't doing so. Too often, I saw my success in school defined as my ability to memorize, check boxes, and follow instructions.

What if schools could offer marginalized youth like me a different approach? What if schools could teach students to build relationships with mentors, teachers, peers, and family? Relationships can bring young people life-changing opportunities and experiences. What if schools could teach students how to solve community problems and gain real-world work experiences? If schools did, they'd help young people give back to their community, help solve its problems, and contribute to society as a whole right away, rather than waiting 20 or 30 years to do so.

Think about the possibilities of teaching students

to take charge of their learning and gain leadership, advocacy and professional skills. Young people would be able to help improve and contribute to any environment or situation they find themselves. They'd be more prepared for college and career and more ready to take charge of their lives.

This is the challenge I and other students are taking on as part of Twin Cities Changemakers. We believe all young people should have ownership, voice and leadership in their learning and schools. We're working to build the leadership of young people to reimagine and revitalize our education system and democracy by inspiring, equipping and amplifying the advocacy and leadership of youth to accelerate school transformation.

**Haben Ghebregish.** Every school in America has a set of values. At High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul, our values are respect, family, community, and education. These values ask students to be responsible for how they treat others, how they engage with their environments, and how they develop their capacities. Many educators are concerned about the lack of accountability for parents and students. As a teacher, I think the greater problem is that schools rarely reflect on what we hold students responsible for and why. Students at schools across the country are frequently disciplined for absences and lateness,

**The way we educate high school youth is boring, demotivating, and obsolete and demands reinvention.**

without consideration of their circumstances—consideration that would likely be given to adult professionals.

Schools reprimand students for being unable to stay in their seats, even though studies show that movement can be a positive learning tool. Many students are held responsible for absorbing material they struggle to find relevant or inspiring. Schools should reexamine their expectations, policies, and codes of conduct to ensure their student

expectations are meaningful and just.

Because I know my own students so well, I recognize their resilience and grit. Many work at least 20 hours a week while juggling school and home responsibilities. A third experience homelessness during the year. Schools can best help students make sense of and overcome obstacles by equipping them with habits of mind responsive and relevant to their own context, culture, and experience.

**Jon Bacal.** The way we educate high school youth is boring, demotivating, and obsolete and demands reinvention. Disengagement is a rational response to a system built a century ago for a nation that sought to prepare factory workers, not creative artisans, innovators, entrepreneurs, and change agents. That nation no longer exists. The good news: We can redesign schools to inspire youth to produce quality work and take initiative and leadership. That's my takeaway from 25 years studying, starting, and leading urban schools and mentoring disengaged youth.

Evidence of the failure of the existing model is everywhere. Nationwide, over one million youth drop out every year and fewer than half who do graduate are ready for college or career. The needle hasn't moved despite raising per-capita funding and tightening standards and testing. A 2019 study of 50 years of test results indicates gains in earlier grades reverse in high school, while gaps between haves and have-nots mostly haven't budged. Meanwhile, surveys show student engagement and hope for the future plummeting from elementary to high school.

I've seen teens put in minimal effort in industrial era classrooms, only to display real effort and talent after hours in extracurriculars, music and social media creation, and out-of-school work opportunities. At schools emphasizing student choice, voice, and experiential learning, I've witnessed previously disengaged youth produce quality and inspiring work during the core school day.

At The Met in Providence, Rhode Island, students

hold workplace internships two full days weekly. At Iowa BIG in Cedar Rapids, student consulting teams work offsite on challenges for local businesses and community organizations. At High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul, students produce music, videos, and documentaries. At each school, students earn academic credit for these deep learning experiences. At each, students are powerfully supported by mentor-educators who know them very well and prioritize building student relationships, confidence and character.

These three and many other like-minded models operate with the same (or less) per-pupil funding as conventional public high schools. Millions of other students and America's future would benefit from similar approaches. It's long past time we engage the creativity and leadership of youth and others in reimagining and redesigning high school so that they do.

*Walter Cortina Martinez is a junior at High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul and founding director of the Twin Cities Changemakers youth leadership project. Haben Ghebregorghish teaches math and coaches Twin Cities Changemakers at High School for Recording Arts. Jon Bacal coaches Twin Cities Changemakers and founded and led Venture Academy in Minneapolis.*

## “DO YOU KNOW WHAT DAY IT IS?”

*By Barry Casselman*

On a recent Friday, while sitting in my favorite coffeehouse and writing on my computer, I decided to take a break from my work to conduct a small informal experiment.

It wasn't just any Friday. It was Friday, November 22.

The coffeehouse-bistro has a number of young men and women waiters and baristas in their 20s and 30s, all of whom know me as a regular cus-



tomers. Each of them is bright and has graduated from high school, and most of them have graduated from or is now attending a college or university. I decided to ask them a simple question: “Do you know what day it is?”

Every one of them knew it was a Friday and the 22nd of November. When I asked them further if the date had any significance, I got a blank look.

To those of us who were teenagers or older at the time, this day, month and the year 1963 were singularly unforgettable and traumatic—it was shared by almost everyone and, in our synchronistic age, at the same time. Generations older

**But just as my knowing about that “day of infamy” helped me to understand and served as a bridge to my contemporary world—so it serves everyone’s interest that newer generations know about those events and histories that have shaped their own world.**

than us had equivalent experiences, for example, the 1929 stock market crash, the 1937 explosion of the Hindenburg, the Orson Welles 1939 *War of the Worlds* broadcast, the Japanese 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and V-J Day.

My generation and younger ones had another on September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center and Washington, D.C. were attacked. (Most of the coffeehouse staff members knew about or remembered something about 9-11, but not the visceral memory that those who live through these kinds of events usually have.)

Earlier extraordinary events such as the 1865 assassination of President Lincoln and the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic* were not so instantly known across the nation, but thanks to the then-recent invention of the telegraph, their social impact was

more or less simultaneous—and they became part of our national folklore.

Even though these events occurred before I was born or was old enough to understand them, once I was in school beyond the earliest grades, I learned in classes about them and their huge psychological impact on our national society. This was reinforced by conversations with older family members and friends.

Although my little coffeehouse survey was non-scientific, I suspect its results would be the same with that age group almost anywhere else.

In an age of digitalization, social media, and political correctness, our public education system faces unprecedented challenges in preparing the nation’s young men and women for adult life. If, in the past, parents assumed that the public education institutions and their faculties would robustly and fairly transmit American culture, history and values, I suggest they can no longer do so. My informal survey anecdote covers only a small aspect of the total challenge. History books are being questionably rewritten. Free speech is being arbitrarily curbed. Public education is often being unilaterally politicized.

This is not the students’ fault, nor ultimately their responsibility. It is, on the other hand, the responsibility of the parents and the leaders of the public education institutions.

I find it instructive that the growing homeschooling movement includes parents who are liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Homeschooling, religious schools, and other forms of private education, while an alternative to failing or inadequate public education, are not available to many American children, especially those from low-income families. Public schools are supported by taxes. This means that increased personal responsibility is placed on the adults who pay the taxes, the politicians who levy the taxes, and the teachers who are paid by the taxes.



I don't expect young persons to feel about November 22, 1963 as I do, as I could not feel about December 7, 1941 as my parents' generation did. But just as my knowing about that "day of infamy" helped me to understand and served as a bridge to my contemporary world, so it serves everyone's interest that newer generations know about those events and histories that have shaped their own world.

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## MANAGING DIABETES AS AN ANALOGY

*By Frank B. Cerra*

Goals of education for a student include achieving her/his greatest potential in a given field of study to prepare for success in life, fulfillment of personal needs, and/or contribution to the community of knowledge and life. Achieving such a goal requires responsible activity of both the student and the institution of learning. The institution has a responsibility of creating an environment of learning, and the student has the responsibility to participate in the learning process and actually master the material.

These responsibilities require real effort to stay focused, attentive, and discerning. There are several challenges along the way:

- Social impediments such as poverty, family fragmentation, racism, and social distractions. While the student must grapple with these, the institution also needs to provide the support platforms to assist in the student's effort. Individual attention rather than one-size-fits-all may be needed. Two of the greatest challenges are housing and food. A sizable percentage of undergraduate students have a major challenge with both of these. Institutions need to provide

access to both affordable housing and access to good food so the student can focus on learning.

- The financial challenge is real. The cost of higher education keeps rising, particularly tuition. The tendency is to approach this challenge with student loans. While this is helpful, students frequently do not understand the long-term implications of such loans, and institutions frequently do not help students to

**Successful management of diabetes does require that the person expend the effort to learn how to self-manage the diet, take medication, and implement exercise regimens.**

understand or provide other alternatives such as work-study, scholarships, and payments from return on investment downstream.

- Accountability is another challenge. Assessment of what is being learned and the process of learning is a responsibility of both the student and the institution. It is frequently not clear who is accountable when learning does not occur, especially when weak mentor systems are present.
- Technology and its innovative contributions to learning are major challenges across generations from those who were "born" with it to those who were educated without it. While the skills of texting and gaming are not the same as those of learning, the technology has the potential to be engaging in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge in the learning process for both students and institutions.

There is an analogy here to that of managing a chronic disease such as diabetes. The provider has a responsibility to educate the person about the disease, and the person has the responsibility to learn about the disease, including its management and when/how to seek timely information from the providers when needed. Analogous challenges to

success also exist in social impediments; the cost of insurance, drugs, and services; technology to assist the learning and management processes; and accountability for the outcomes of the management plan. The health system has the responsibility to provide the platforms and support systems that enable the challenges to be met. Successful management of diabetes does require that the person expend the effort to learn how to self-manage the diet, take medication, and implement exercise regimens.

Together, the person and the institution can avoid complications and enable a relatively normal lifestyle and life expectancy and contribute to society. In both instances of learning and chronic disease management, there is considerable room for improvement by both the person and the institution. The commitment of both parties to work together to achieve the desired outcomes is an essential success factor.

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## IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO CONCENTRATE THE MIND

*By Chuck Chalberg*

We all have our own “I wish I had a nickel every time” lines. One of mine fits the very theme of this symposium: I wish I had a nickel for every time a student told me, “I’m not a very good test taker.” A distant second might be, “Your teaching style doesn’t match my learning style.”

The two lines are not unrelated. That’s because a significant element of my teaching style had more than a small something to do with my testing style.

In the first place, my style included tests. By that I really mean exams, especially mid-term and final exams that had a major impact on a student’s final grade. More specifically, I mean in-the-seat, individually taken, proctored exams. Not take-home

exams. Not optional exams. Not oral exams. Not retaken exams. And not group exams.

Softy that I long ago decided to be, these exams were announced exams. In the increasingly dim dark ages of my own in-the-seat college days, I once had a professor who specialized in unannounced mid-term exams. Nasty? To be sure. Unfair? Probably. Cruel? Perhaps. But the policy certainly had the effect of concentrating the mind for more than a few weeks between, say, mid-October and as late as mid-November of an otherwise idling fall semester.

Unannounced or otherwise, nothing concentrates a student’s mind better than the prospect of facing an exam, especially if that exam comes in the form of a previously unseen set of questions and an empty

**There’s a lesson here for all of us, whether we be students, teachers, or anyone else. It’s never too late to concentrate the mind and get down to work.**

blue book. That would be the case even if their distributor had slacked off to the point of actually revealing the day that the exam would be given.

Before proceeding further, let me dispense with a few “of courses.” Of course, my frame of reference here is the college classroom. But the principle surely applies elsewhere. Appropriately administered, testing at all levels is crucial. My concern here is not testing to determine the performance of the school but testing to determine the performance of the student—and primarily for the sake of the student. After all, what could be a better measure for a student when it comes to assessing self-esteem? That would be earned self-esteem—as if there is some other brand of self-esteem that ought to matter.

In my experience, too many of my community college students were not good test takers because they had very limited experience with the kind of

test-taking that I have just described. Or with the idea that test taking truly does matter.

Of course (here I go again), exam scores should not be the only basis for determining a student's final grade. That stipulated, exams—real exams—should constitute a healthy portion of that final grade. Half? At least. Two-thirds? Perhaps.

And of course, my approach often resulted in a measurable number of dropouts and failures, even if it surely was not designed to weed out, demean, or otherwise discourage students. The only way to avoid such an outcome would be to collapse standards.

Now for two quick stories: one from near the beginning of my teaching days and the other from close to the end. A student who had failed my course had come to see me. She was not happy. At one point, I pointed to the grade book and commented that she wasn't alone. Her response was to ask me what that told me about myself. A bit stunned, I managed to blurt something to the effect it told me that I was teaching at a college with an open-door policy that let virtually anyone give college a try.

Nasty? No. Harsh? Perhaps. True? Certainly. And there should be such places for all sorts of students. Community colleges are a great American invention, not to mention great places for students to make that first, second, or even third old college try.

Of course (here I go yet again), teachers should do their best to help students succeed. But ultimately the responsibility for that success rests on the student. The sooner that students—and teachers—grasp this, the better.

I have a hunch that a student of mine did come to such an understanding during one of my last American history courses at my community college. Prior to the mid-term exam, he'd been a very engaged student and a lively participant in class discussions. Then came the exam (each of which I would always read with the cover page turned

over to assure anonymity). His score was a modest 72, or barely a C-minus. As he left the class during which I had returned exams, I stopped him to ask why he hadn't done better.

His response was immediate, telling and unforgettable: "I never study for a first exam." Just like Joe Mauer, I replied. Take that first pitch. See what's being offered before swinging. His tactic was to see how well he could do without studying. He then went on to assure me that he would do better on the next one. And guess what? He did. When all was said and written, he wound up with an A, and a very well-earned A, at that.

Notice what he didn't say when I first asked him about that 72: He didn't shrug his shoulders and tell me that he just wasn't a very good test taker. He simply told me the truth and got down to work. There's a lesson here for all of us, whether we be students, teachers, or anyone else. It's never too late to concentrate the mind and get down to work.

*John C. "Chuck" Chalberg is retired from many years of teaching American history at Normandale Community College.*

## **RESPONSIBILITY STARTS AT THE TOP**

*By John A. Charles, Jr.*

When discussing the role of personal responsibility in education, it's tempting to think primarily about the student. But responsibility starts at the top—with parents, teachers, and administrators. Students can't do it alone.

Parents have the most important role in fostering a culture of responsibility, and many are failing. "Helicopter parenting" is now the norm. Students are given fancy smart phones while still in elementary school, because parents can't stand the thought of being out of touch. Relatively few children are allowed to walk to school, depriving them of an important part of student socialization.

In my suburban neighborhood, every morning I see parents walking or bicycling to school with their children, even though the total distance travelled is no more than five blocks. I'm often tempted to yell out the window, "Leave them alone!"

Unfortunately, many parents who hover over their children out of a misplaced sense of duty neglected to make a much more important choice years earlier—conceiving within a healthy marriage. More than 40 percent of all births in the United States are to unmarried women. Starting a family without a spouse is the single biggest barrier to success that a woman can erect for her children.

**Parents should require their children to get paid employment as early as possible. Children can usually find jobs in the underground economy (e.g., babysitting and lawn mowing) by age 13.**

In addition to getting married, prospective parents need to prepare financially. Many don't. Roughly 43 percent of U.S. births are paid for by Medicaid. Being on public assistance should be a sign that the time is not right to start a family. Ignoring that reality means that the future children will be placed at a learning disadvantage.

However, even marriage and money are not enough. Parents need to impose discipline and structure, and that is often lacking. In fact, wealthy married parents are frequently the worst offenders. Too many try to over-plan childhood, scripting every free hour of the day. Many affluent students never get after-school jobs and are even encouraged to seek unpaid internships while in college.

It's not surprising that so many of them demand "safe spaces" at school when their own parents have raised them in bubbles.

Parents should require their children to get paid employment as early as possible. Children can

usually find jobs in the underground economy (e.g., babysitting and lawn mowing) by age 13. At 16, they should be drawing a steady paycheck and paying taxes. The rigors of showing up on time and performing assigned work will help teenagers become more responsible in all phases of life, including academics.

Although they may not admit it, young people crave high standards and discipline. The best way forward is for the adults to impose that structure and for the students to be accountable for their own performance. Students who are challenged to achieve at a high level will learn how to reach goals against great odds. The adults around them should not cheat them of that satisfying experience by lowering the bar in the name of equity or diversity.

The current debacle regarding the entrance exams to the elite New York City public high schools offers some lessons. The entrance exams were originally established as an antidote to racism. The test results were colorblind, which promoted a meritocracy.

Today's progressives now demand that the exams be eliminated because not enough black and Hispanic students are being admitted to the top schools.

The freshman class of 895 students admitted to Stuyvesant High School this year included only seven black students. This was seen by liberals as a great failure of testing. But the outraged commentators neglected to think of it from the perspective of the seven students themselves. How great must it feel to walk the hallways knowing that everyone was admitted on merit?

Imposing entrance exams and fostering academic competition throughout a school district would dramatically improve the educational experience. The current model of assigning students to public schools based primarily on zip codes or a lottery is dysfunctional. The status quo creates an entitlement attitude for students: "I exist, therefore I'm here."



That's not the way sports teams are chosen. Students must compete to make varsity. Top players want to be around other top players; the same holds true in the classroom. Instead of suppressing that desire, we should foster it. We should also allow teachers full discretion to remove disruptive or under-performing students from the classroom temporarily or permanently, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or household income.

If students begin to embrace a greater sense of personal responsibility, school administrators need to support it. They frequently fail in this regard by pandering to the lowest common denominator of student behavior. In Portland, Oregon, whenever teenagers organize a student walk-out to protest a perceived social injustice, usually related to climate action, public school administrators allow the protesters to leave school without consequences.

This appeasement undermines efforts by non-protesting students to be responsible.

In the most recent walk-out, one affluent suburban district even supplied buses to transport the protesters to downtown Portland. What kind of a message is that?

The popular cure for failing schools is more public funding. That misses the point. Creating and enforcing a top-to-bottom culture of personal responsibility is a lot more important to student success than money, and it doesn't cost anything.

*John A. Charles, Jr. is president and CEO of Cascade Policy Institute in Portland, OR.*

## **LIBERAL AND ILLIBERAL EDUCATION**

*By Laurence Cooper*

Higher education in the United States today has more than a little in common with Las Vegas. The similarities range from the material (seemingly inexhaustible flows of money) and the mundane (top

of the line amenities) to the aesthetic (where else can one encounter fine imitations of Old Europe in close company with the sleekest glass and steel) and the metaphysical (a penchant for maintaining a certain detachment from reality). Each, in its way, fancies itself an oasis in the desert.

Of course, there are also some important differences, beginning with this one: Unlike Las Vegas, what happens in the universities doesn't stay in the universities. Ideas and opinions nurtured there have a way of seeping into the culture at large, particularly secondary education. For this reason alone, a discussion of higher education belongs in this CAE symposium.

Yet what makes higher education most concerning today is something it holds in common with its unlikely cousin in Nevada: it is pervaded by a troubled and troubling conception of freedom. Higher education embraces an array of instructional enterprises—undergraduate and graduate, specialized and general, problematizing and problem-solving. At its heart, though, higher education is liberal education, or study of the liberal arts. The terminology is telling. “Liberal education” means an education that befits a free person and sustains a free society. But what is a free person, and what is a free society?

Is freedom a birthright or an accomplishment or both? What freedoms should we hold sacrosanct, and why? How one answers these questions inevitably determines the character of higher education, and, for that matter, the health of the American regime. It is with respect to these questions, it seems to me—and especially with respect to the question of free speech—that the academy has gone most badly astray. I base this claim not on a survey of what faculty are teaching or what administrators are administering but on the expressed attitudes of current and recent college students in the United States.

While some parts of the picture are contestable, survey data indicate that over the past several years American undergraduates have professed less



support for free speech than have preceding generations and have noted increased intolerance within their communities for a considerable swath of “controversial” views. (The scare quotes are necessary because some of these views fall well within the mainstream of American popular opinion.)

The intolerance noted by students is expressed most luridly in the form of cancellation culture and the like, but perhaps most worrisomely, because most insidiously, in the form of self-censorship.

**Unlike Las Vegas, what happens in the universities doesn't stay in the universities. Ideas and opinions nurtured there have a way of seeping into the culture at large, particularly secondary education.**

The latter judgment is of course my own, and it deserves a word of elaboration. By thinking about self-censorship, it seems to me, we can more readily appreciate how the diminishment of free speech will almost inevitably become the diminishment of free thought. It's unpleasant to incur the opprobrium of one's community for expressing one's views, and probably even more unpleasant—certainly it's more demoralizing—to refrain from expressing one's views for fear of opprobrium. Better to find a way not to dissent in the first place.

What accounts for this turn?

Doubtless the answer is multipartite and involves changes in the social landscape whose origins are independent of the academy—changed patterns of child-rearing, for example. But it also seems likely that the enervation of free speech owes more than a little to the academy itself. Think of speech codes and platform denial. Think of the enormous ideological imbalance and lack of viewpoint diversity among faculty. (The facts have been assembled by such organizations as FIRE and Heterodox Academy.) Most of all, notice the fierce moralism and the frequently ideological language of the assaults on

free speech, and consider whether these attributes don't seem to suggest the working out of an idea or set of ideas.

In short, if increasing numbers of today's students are skeptical of free speech, that might have something to do with the entrenchment in certain precincts of the academy of ideas that dispute the foundations of free speech and indeed the foundations of liberalism more generally. Making matters even more vexing is that those who level the most fundamental challenges to freedom of speech and other liberal principles claim that what they are opposing are false or debased conceptions of freedom and that they are themselves the champions of true freedom or freedom properly understood.

This is always the way of utopianism. Defenders of liberalism, whether political or educational, need to recognize this. It won't suffice to stand vigil against the barbarians at the gates. Barbarism is already in our midst. And those who have sown the seeds of this barbarism, though illiberal, are not barbarians at all.

*Laurence Cooper is a professor of political science at Carleton College.*

## **“LET US CALL STUDENTS TO HARD THINGS”**

*By Jim Daly and Glenn T. Stanton*

We love our common topic here, as it gets at a very important angle regarding education that has long been ignored in our nation's ongoing debate. It's the virtue of high expectations, hard work, and the responsibility of individual students and their families. The classroom is where nearly all of us faced our first real-life challenges—demands that we often feared we would not be able to overcome but did not have the option of avoiding. Facing and overcoming those hurdles taught us as much as the content of our lessons, if not more. To rob our children of these experiences is to cheat them profoundly.

A half-century of sophisticated academic research on educational attainment significantly confirms what most people have long known: Family is as strong a factor in a student's success as any other resource—much more important than school funding, union concessions, or newness of school buildings.

There is another essential factor in educational excellence that is equally ignored: the expectations that parents, teachers, principals, and the nation place upon students. We seem more concerned for students' feelings and comfort and for toeing the

**Ask anyone to describe what made their favorite teacher their favorite. They won't tell you it's because the instructor had no expectations and let them skate through.**

line on political correctness than calling students to excellence, resilience, and academic rigor. Too often, educators protect their students from these things. No one thrives under such protection. It requires high expectation and encouragement. Consider this very non-scientific analysis: popular movies.

In 1967, Sidney Poitier gave us Mark Thackery, an engineer who settles for a high school teaching job in one of London's most challenging neighborhoods. The classroom he enters on his first day is one of sheer anarchy, a free-for-all. Thackery is not prepared for how bad it is. His calm demeanor is shattered when a student sets a fire in the classroom. After some time of great struggle, he angrily tells them he expects each of them to graduate and that he will treat each of them respectfully as the adults they are, and he demands the same respect from them. This is a turning point. They respond to this higher calling, and their educational experience—give or take a few challenges—becomes rich and successful. They have become different, much better people and more confident and comfortable with themselves.

At year's end, to share their appreciation for his dogged tough love, the graduating class presents him with a gift addressed, "To Sir, with love." Thackery's success with the students compels him to change his plans for next year, deciding to return to the classroom in the fall. Firm rules, the expectation of two-way respect, and high expectations—that was the secret that produced seemingly impossible results.

There are a host of other inspirational cinematic stories of teaching challenges to come through the decades, many based on the lives of real-life educators. Edward James Olmos's Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and Morgan Freeman's Joe Clark in *Lean on Me* a year later would not tolerate the slavery of low expectations in their schools. Nor would they tolerate excuses from students, be they fear, poverty, or a heritage of poor grades and behavioral problems. They demanded excellence and sweat from the brows of themselves and their students. Their students became not only successful, but winners.

Although taking place outside of the classroom, it was Mr. Miyagi who dramatically transformed the shiftless, single-parented Danny LaRusso in *Karate Kid* by making nearly impossible demands involving back-breaking, hand-blistering exercises like "paint-the-fence" and "wax-on/wax-off." Miyagi would not let the kid give up. Those demands and determination created the unlikely All-Valley Karate Champion.

High school football head coach Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington in *Remember the Titans*, found himself fighting for his job amid racial tensions in the school and community. To prove himself and the ability of his racially integrated squad, he pushed his players relentlessly through pre-season training camp, stretching them beyond the limits of their ability. He inspired them to settle for nothing less than what they became—undefeated champions.

Laurence Fishburne's Dr. Joshua Larabee agrees to tutor 11-year-old Akeelah Anderson, a poor,

troublesome, and often truant African-American girl, to compete in the Scripps National Spelling Bee in *Akeelah and the Bee*. He is an unrelenting taskmaster because he believes in her ability, and he demands that she do the same. She wins the co-championship along with her Chinese-American competitor after they both exhaust the list of words the judges had prepared for the tournament.

Each of these teachers forever changed the lives of their students by setting very high personal standards and expectations for them, constantly reiterating their confidence in the students' ability to succeed, and not allowing them to make excuses or give up. The students, in turn, experienced the wonderful joys of success built upon sheer perseverance. Of course, these experiences made them not only better students but much better people! That is what great teachers do. They make great students and better people through their high expectations and tireless commitment.

Ask anyone to describe what made their favorite teacher their favorite. They won't tell you it's because the instructor had no expectations and let them skate through. Rather, they will point to the teacher who called them up to something difficult and noble and wouldn't let them give up until they achieved it.

Let us call students to hard things. Help them over, under, and around the inevitable challenges. Help them keep their eyes on the prize of educational excellence. Their future, and ours, depends on it.

*Jim Daly is the president of Focus on the Family. Glenn T. Stanton is director of family formation studies for Focus on the Family.*

## STUDENTS GOING FIRST IN MAKING CHANGES

*By William J. Doherty*

So much of the conversation about educational achievement gaps for students of color focuses

on what teachers and schools do, or do not do, for students. Students are portrayed as recipients of the latest ideas that adults cook up for them. But what can students do for themselves through joint action? Here I describe my experience with a project with male African American high school students in an urban school district.

Two male colleagues (both black) and I (a white man) began with three assumptions. That relationships are key to learning. That two key relationships for high school young men are those with

**For example, actions with teachers included asking for help (this had been hard for them to do), not ratcheting up conflict, and apologizing when this was called for.**

teachers and young women. And black young men themselves would recognize the importance of these relationships to their learning and would commit to working on those relationships as a vehicle to improve their academic achievement. All of these assumptions bore fruit in The Relationships Project.

I will begin with the ending so as not to raise the reader's expectations too high. Although The Relationships Project was successful at engaging the students for 2.5 years, it was discontinued because of funding cuts and personnel changes before an adequate evaluation of academic outcomes could be conducted. So what follows is an illustration of a different way of engaging students as active agents of change in their school environment, as opposed to a proven program.

The group consisted of 17 black male high school students with two black male process leaders and me as the designer of the meetings and note taker. Meetings occurred during the school day. The process was intentionally democratic; everything was designed by the group of students and adult leaders in a flattened hierarchy, using an approach I have

developed called, “The Families and Democracy Model.” (Doherty, W. J., Mendenhall, T. J., & Berge, J. M.: “The Families and Democracy and Citizen Health Care Project,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 36, 389-402.)

The main goal was to achieve more academic success through improving relationships with teachers and young women. The second goal was to spread what we learn to other black male students at our high school and beyond. We read those goals aloud at the outset of every meeting along with the following statements of how we work together:

- We focus on what we can do ourselves, on our end, to improve relationships with teachers and young women. We go first in making changes.
- We take time to go deep.
- We think big and act practically.
- We are disciplined in our group process, including not having side conversations, not using cell phones, and limiting interruptions. We hold ourselves accountable in our meetings.

The students began by generating lists of values they wanted to bring to their relationships with teachers and young women. Then they interviewed teachers and young women about what they were looking for in relationships with young black men and what they thought of the values. These were powerful experiences for everyone involved; seldom do adults or young women sit with young men (of any color) for an open conversation about how young men can change in order to be better relationship partners—in this case, for the goal of academic success.

From the goals and values, the students generated personal and collective action steps for their relationships and began to work on them. For example, actions with teachers included asking for help (this had been hard for them to do), not ratcheting up conflict, and apologizing when this was called for. With young women, the key action step was framed as “respect, respect, respect,” which included going slow in relationships—not expecting something sexual and other actions such as

“being mature: not showing off and acting dumb to impress them.” (You can see that the language is from the students themselves.) As the months went on, the group did regular consultations on challenges and strategies for improving these relationships. They held one another accountable.

What struck me most during this project was that the students felt empowered by the idea that they could be active agents of change in their key school relationships. What’s more, they fully embraced the idea that they would go first in making changes, not expecting teachers or young women to go first. During consultations about negative experiences with teachers (including encounters they believed had racist overtones), they were willing to keep returning to the central principle that we can’t change anyone else—we can only change ourselves. And this means going first in making changes, rather than waiting for the other person to change. A life lesson for school and everywhere else.

*William J. Doherty is a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota.*

## **HABITS CONDUCTIVE TO EXCELLENCE ALIVE IN MANY IMMIGRANT HOMES**

*By Nicholas Eberstadt*

Young men and women in school today face an environment decidedly less conducive to forming the habits necessary for achievement and success than in preceding generations.

Despite all the wealth our nation has accumulated over the past half century, despite all the astonishing new technical advances at our disposal now but not back then, the plain fact is that in any quest for excellence America’s students today face much more serious headwinds than those of us raised in the 1950s, ’60s, or ’70s had to contend with.

To begin: family breakdown is far more acute today—for all ethnic groups—than 50 years



ago. Of course, children from what used to be called “broken homes” can obtain the parental love, attention and guidance to set them on the path to achievement—think of the inspiring individuals each of us know who prove that point. But family breakdown has incontestably disadvantaged a great many prospective young learners for whom the path to achievement will be much harder to find.

The drop-off in mobility—including geographic mobility—likewise weighs against inculcating habits of success in young students. Today’s boys and girls are much less likely to move than were their parents (and grandparents)—meaning among other things they are less likely to leave neighborhoods where dysfunctional norms prevail if they are so unlucky as to be born into one.

A decline in religiosity across the country may also have played an indirect and incalculable role in creating headwinds against the habits necessary for achievement—not least because convinced adherents from the Judeo-Christian tradition understand in their bones that they are personally accountable to their Creator for what they do and fail to do.

The rise of the internet has been at best a mixed blessing. Living online is a great and terrible temptation for today’s youth. Among the many dangers of falling into the web are its reward of immediate gratification and, conversely, its untoward influence on concentration and sustained attentive thinking.

The internet offers a permanent omnipresent invitation to subvert habits essential to achievement and excellence and its allure is always just one click away.

Then there is our country’s public K-12 school system. Despite the ocean of money taxpayers pour into it, its results at the national level are distressingly mediocre. We can call out and castigate the many corruptions constraining the system not only from teaching students but from instilling a love of learning and excellence. These include unchecked bureaucratism, unaccountable teachers’ unions, and the fashionable, poisonous new ideologies wafting through the classrooms.

Yet just for a moment, leave these well justified complaints aside: The truth of the matter is that the task of inculcating the traits of successful people through schools is inherently far more difficult nowadays than a half-century ago. This is the case quite simply because so many other institutions in civil society have decayed or failed over the past two generations while the school system is still standing. As a consequence, a multiplicity of new, unfamiliar, and sometimes unsuitable tasks are piled on the modern schoolteacher’s shoulders. Little wonder so many educators are diverted from their mission.

This is a dispiriting *tour d’horizon*, to be sure. But the contemporary American tableau is not without its bright spots, too, including some great and under-appreciated sources for hope. One of those sources of hope is our immigrant population, which often embody American values better than the native-born citizenry does.

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The quest to instill habits conducive to excellence and attainment in the rising generation is alive and well in a great many

| Mean Years of Schooling, Americans<br>25-29 Years of Age, 2010-2019:<br>Two Native-Born Parents vs. At Least 1 Foreign-Born Parent |                |                  |                          |
|--|----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Ethnicity  | Native Parents | Foreign Parent/s | Immigrant Parenting Edge |
| White (non-Hisp.)  | 14.14          | 14.56            | +0.41                    |
| Black (non-Hisp.)  | 13.16          | 14.21            | +1.05                    |
| Hispanic   | 13.13          | 13.15            | +0.02                    |
| Asian (non-Hisp.)  | 14.33          | 15.03            | +0.70                    |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS) ASEC Datafile



immigrant homes. The statistical proof of this contention can be seen in the chart on the previous page. It compares the educational attainment in 2019 of Americans in their late 20s (the age by which most have completed their schooling) according to ethnicity and whether one's parents were born abroad.

The striking—and heartening—finding is this: Young adults in America tend to be more educated if they have immigrant parents, no matter their race or ethnicity. The “immigrant parenting

**Ask what our immigrant parents are doing right with their kids. Figure out what it is. Then, let those parents be an example for the rest of us.**

edge” seems to be lower for Latinos than for other groups, but when one bears in mind how much lower educational levels for Hispanic immigrants to the United States have been in recent decades, managing to raise their children's educational profile even a bit above the native-born Hispanic level should be recognized for the tremendous accomplishment that it is. There is reason to suspect, furthermore, that favorable educational outcomes for immigrants' children are just one evident sign of a broader grounding in the habits and aspirations that help young people succeed, regardless of race or creed.

So, here is one suggestion for making it a little easier for kids today to fall into the habits of mind and habits of behavior that will help them achieve and succeed in life: Ask what our immigrant parents are doing right with their kids. Figure out what it is. Then, let those parents be an example for the rest of us. The United States has a lot to learn from its very newest Americans: If we let them, they can teach us how to help our children thrive.

*Nicholas Eberstadt holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute.*

## **SCHOOLS NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF FREEDOM THEY DO HAVE**

*By Sondra Erickson*

Minnesota state statutes afford school districts and charter schools real freedom to assume responsibilities which, I fear, they don't take enough advantage of. And, that could be one of the reasons a gap in achievement and opportunity exists.

First is 120B.021: Required Academic Standards. Do districts and charters ensure that our teachers know, understand and apply the state standards of language arts, mathematics and science every day they teach? Do they hold students accountable for the benchmarks of these standards so that testing is not feared when students test in grades 3-8 and again in 9, 10 or 11, as required by the state and used for federal accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

Moreover, does the curriculum for these subjects support the standards and ensure that students know and understand the benchmarks of these standards?

Second is 120B.018 under definitions. Districts and charters complain that they are stuck with students earning credits and that disallows innovation such as project-based learning or personalized learning. It's not true: In statute, credit means “the determination by the local school district that a student has successfully completed an academic year of study or mastered the applicable subject matter.” Note that the definition provides for a lot of latitude if a district or charter wants to innovate. In fact, it is a way for students to test out of courses at the high school level through CLEP (the college-level examination program).

Furthermore, there are statutes for which schools can honor responsibility as site-based or as part of an innovation zone, giving them numerous opportunities for students and teachers to innovate.

Next is 120B.235 which supports the study of civics as a course of study, or as required in a section of the Social Studies Standards, and that provides for responsibility to teach our students how to be good citizens. It is the American Heritage Education section of statute that permits districts and charters to offer grade-level instruction for students to read and study America's founding documents,

**In summary, the education sections of law in Minnesota offer no end to responsibilities that districts and charters can and should honor.**

including documents that contributed to the foundation or maintenance of America's representative form of limited government, the Bill of Rights, our free-market economic system, and patriotism.

And for all the complaints about time spent on testing, there is statute 120B.301: Limits on local testing. In grades 1 through 6, the cumulative total amount of time spent taking locally adopted districtwide or schoolwide assessments must not exceed 10 hours per school year. And for students in grades 7 through 12, it is 11 hours.

In summary, the education sections of law in Minnesota offer no end to responsibilities that districts and charters can and should honor. Certainly, honoring the statutes cited here could help close the gaps in both achievement and opportunity.

*Rep. Sondra Erickson, a Republican from Princeton, represents HD15A and is ranking member of the Minnesota House Education Policy Committee.*

## RESTORING THE DREAM

*By Todd R. Flanders*

I share a dream. It's a dream that all our children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content

of their character.

The man who famously gave voice to that dream has long inspired American educators. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. we have believed in a high ideal encoded in our national DNA: Every child is created equal and should be prepared for a life of ordered liberty, personal responsibility, and contribution to the common good. Lord knows the dream faces daunting impediments, from racial and ethnic prejudice to poverty and family breakdown.

Undaunted, teachers have wanted to stand and deliver for each child. The spirit has been, "You've got what it takes! Don't let anyone convince you that you don't!" King's dream affirmed that the founders of this country spoke truth. In the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, they offered "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." That ideal and the dream it inspired are now imperiled by the very education establishment long charged with pursuing it.

The ideal is being reframed as a false myth spun by self-interested white men in 1776 to perpetuate their lock on power. Contra King, America's "founding ideals were false when they were written," according to *The New York Times*' "1619 Project." Devoid of input from the most distinguished historians of the period, the *Times* argues that slavery, racism, and oppression are at the root of "nearly everything" that is exceptional about this country. While it is tempting to shrug off this redirection of the national story away from hope, the project has been turned into a curriculum widely adopted in schools.

The upshot of this way of thinking is that whenever there is a school policy that results in a "disparate impact" on minority students, that impact is the result of racism. The *Times*' ideological intervention comes late in a game already well underway in K-12 education. Here in Minnesota, our Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board is considering changes in teacher licensing rules to include words and terms associated with this agenda: "implicit bias," "disrupting," "systems

of oppression,” “institutional racism,” “systemic racism,” and “microaggressions.”

From student discipline to student achievement, the impact of an ideology presumably intended to benefit minorities has precisely the opposite effect. Lowering behavioral and academic expectations in an effort to reduce disparate impacts results in worse behavior and less achievement.

**That ideal and the dream it inspired are now imperiled by the very education establishment long charged with pursuing it.**

Aaron Benner, a black former teacher in St. Paul Public Schools, openly criticized the district for failing black students with new, lax disciplinary policies. He won a large legal settlement against the district for retaliating against him. And new data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress shows across-the-board Minnesota declines in African-American public school student achievement from 2013-2019, years during which the ideology was gaining a foothold. While cause and effect are complicated, the correlation is suggestive.

A recent president spoke of “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” In the name of anti-racism, the new ideology is not only promoting soft bigotry but perpetrating new forms of oppression. When personal responsibility in education is removed from minority students (or any students), how could one expect growth in achievement and responsibility? If a disadvantaged minority student is led to see himself as nothing but a victim, repressed by a fundamentally racist system, how can he view himself as anyone’s equal? Why even try, when success is said to be the result of privilege that you lack and can never hope to have? The new ideology doesn’t raise up, it tears down. Grounded in envy and a radical rejection of America’s founding principles, it sows seeds of despair.

We need to restore the dream, which Dr. King

insisted is “deeply rooted in the American dream.” We need to believe what he and American educators have long known: All children are created equal and have the capacity to develop good character and to grow in achievement. We must rededicate ourselves to finding ways to cash that promissory note.

*Todd R. Flanders is headmaster of Providence Academy in Plymouth, MN.*

## **SCHOOL CHOICE AFFORDS PARENTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION**

*By Liv Finne*

Personal responsibility in education means that students should be taught to think for themselves, be responsible for their own learning development, and be prepared after graduation to live as engaged citizens and caring members of the community. It also means that parents should be allowed to take responsibility for the learning progress of their own children.

This understanding of personal responsibility is not encouraged by the current system of public education. Parents are usually not permitted to direct the education of their children. Educating children is seen as the government’s job.

Yet the government’s involvement is institutional, not personal. Government officials fund and staff the schools. They are not primarily concerned with educating each and every child. The government rarely closes a school when it fails children. Instead, the government gives failing schools more money, more staff, and more directives from local, state, and federal school bureaucracies.

About a third of children receive an adequate education in this rigid, top-down system. The rest do not.

Parents, on the other hand, feel a deep personal responsibility and duty to educate their children. Many parents chafe at the arbitrary limits imposed by public schools. Parents notice many school officials are lackadaisical about establishing cultures

## Parents are realizing change is necessary.

that expect students to work hard. Many parents do not subscribe to a therapeutic culture that makes “everyone a winner” and where achievement trophies are replaced by recognition trophies. Many parents want schools to hold their children accountable for doing their academic best.

Yet parents are forced to participate in school cultures they do not respect. Instead of allowing parents a better option, schools force parents to stay in the system. Parents are reduced to passive recipients of decisions reached by school officials, however low the bar.

Parents are realizing change is necessary.

Parents are now demanding school choice. School choice includes homeschooling, online schooling, public charter schools, magnet schools, public scholarships to private schools, and private schools. School choice is more common than it was in the past, and today one in five students benefits from school choice. School choice allows parents more control, more agency, and more personal responsibility over their child’s education. A new poll from RealClear Education shows 70 percent of voters support school choice, and that 69 percent of parents would prefer not to send their children to the public school they have been assigned by zip code.

Sarah Carpenter has emerged as a heroine of school choice. Recently 2.4 million people watched a video of Ms. Carpenter asking Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, to drop her opposition to public charter schools.

Sarah Carpenter is an African American grandmother of 15 and great-grandmother of one from North Memphis, Tennessee. She cleaned houses for a living. She noticed her grandchildren were assigned to schools identified by the school system as “failing” or “priority” schools. Then Ms. Carpenter’s granddaughter was offered the opportunity to attend a KIPP charter school. The Carpenter family seized the opportunity, and now this granddaughter is the first person in four generations of the family to graduate from college.

Ms. Carpenter wants nothing to do with a school system that props up failing schools and promotes children from grade to grade without giving them the skills they need. She has no patience for public officials who blame the poverty of families for school failure. She does not believe her grandchildren should be sacrificed to bad teachers protected by powerful unions.

In education, government schools have undermined the personal responsibility of parents and of students. School choice corrects this weakness by shifting decision-making power to parents, where it belongs. School choice allows parents to select schools that expect their children to work hard and take personal responsibility for their own educations. They don’t fool children by giving out recognition trophies for just showing up.

*Liv Finne is director of the Center for Education at the Washington Policy Center in Seattle, WA.*

## **BOTH PUBLIC POLICY AND TWO-PARENT FAMILIES**

*By Paul Gessing*

Where do personal responsibility and “adverse circumstances” overlap in the world of education? This discussion ranks right up there with nature vs. nurture and determining how much “grit” people have or are able to develop in their personal makeup.



As the president of a think tank that works to reform education policy in one of the nation's poorest and worst performing states (New Mexico appears at the very bottom of a variety of education rankings, including the all-important NAEP), I believe improving education is critical. As the father of three daughters, two of whom are in the public education system, my policy concern is also a personal concern.

Ultimately, the discussion of personal responsibility and outcomes in education must fall into the realm of public policy. We know, for example, that some small number of children deviate dramatically from parental direction

**As a parent, I don't think it is a wise strategy to expect anything less than the very best from every child, no matter the child's race, language, or family status.**

(loving parents raising misguided children or children of bad, undisciplined parents who perform well in school), but the discussion I think is particularly relevant in New Mexico is ways in which policymakers can either supplement strong families or address the problems created by dysfunctional families.

Should we as individuals attempt to explain away a child's failure regardless of his or her personal background? Absolutely not. But the truth is that not all children are able to overcome disadvantages, or at least no method has proven successful in enabling all students to be successful all the time.

The Urban Institute attempts to start the discussion about putting students with more challenged outcomes on a more even playing field with students of more optimal backgrounds. The organization's 2015 report, "How do states really stack up on the 2015 NAEP?" attempts to equalize statewide results based on demographics. A separate report also by the Urban Institute attempts

to do the same for school districts.

Is it possible to equalize education results based on demographics like race and poverty? Is it fair to those students from either different socioeconomic groups or ethnicities to be told essentially that less is expected of them based on who they are and how much money their families make? Those are worthwhile questions, and while the Urban Institute is a credible left-of-center think tank, similar information might not be received as well from a right-of-center think tank, no matter how well-intentioned or accurate the information.

A more interesting question and one that gets to the heart of the personal responsibility issue is how this demographic analysis can and should evolve over time. For example, New Mexico is one of five so-called "majority-minority" U.S. states. But unlike California, Nevada, and Texas, more than 90 percent of New Mexico's population is native born.

It is one thing for a foreigner (possibly of school age, but possibly a child who grew up in a non-native, English-speaking household) to show up in the United States with little or no knowledge of the English language and lag behind academically. Yet at what point should the challenges associated with being a minority wear off? Is the assumption that certain minority groups will always lag behind and if so, on what are those assumptions based, and why? Also, how are those assumptions calculated and compiled based on different characteristics?

I realize these are highly sensitive questions to ask, and even the Urban Institute does not provide a detailed breakdown of exactly how much weight is given to each variable. To its credit, however, the organization does include "family structure" among the variables taken into account in its baseline report.

Many people on the left would prefer to ignore the importance of two-parent families as a poverty-fighting tool, but from a simple statistical point of view, having families with two income earners,



or one “bread winner” and someone who raises children full-time, will help alleviate poverty. That doesn’t account for the various stability and childhood trauma issues associated with divorce and fractured families.

As a parent, I don’t think it is a wise strategy to expect anything less than the very best from every child, no matter the child’s race, language, or family status. As a policy expert and realist, I recognize the reality that disparate outcomes are not easy to avoid in all circumstances.

How to account for that is one factor in attempting to measure effectively how well school districts and education systems perform.

*Paul Gessing is president of the Rio Grande Foundation in Albuquerque, NM.*

## “WHO IS WORKING HARDER AND SHOWING MORE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY?”

*By Mark C. Gordon*

Why shouldn’t we expect students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be more diligent and just work harder? I think the problem is not that we expect too little of these students but rather that we offer them too little support.

It is difficult to have any conversation on this topic without engaging in gross generalizations and stereotypes, but, accepting that, I would offer a somewhat different perspective and set of propositions. Why have we structured our institutions and expectations to coincide with the life experiences of the more privileged? Why do we assume that the kinds of support that are built into our current practices and institutions are somehow the appropriate default setting and that other kinds of support represent something extra? Why do we assume that underperforming students are not working as hard or showing the same effort as

higher performing ones?

My experiences as president of a college and dean of two law schools have pointed me toward different conclusions. At the college where I was president, over 30 percent of entering students were the first generation in their families to attend college. What I saw were students who were handling numerous difficult and challenging issues in their lives that interfered with their ability to focus on academic performance. It is very difficult to focus academically when your parents are about to be kicked out of their home as part of a foreclosure proceeding. The same is true when you need to work extra hours to put food on the table or care for a sick relative.

As far as I am concerned, those students work at least as hard as their more privileged classmates—often much harder. And, in many cases, they show amazing resilience. Yet how hard they work is not reflected in the grades used to judge performance, because they do not have the time to study and excel the way more privileged students do.

Who is working harder and showing more personal responsibility? The privileged youth who does not have to worry about finances, has easy access to a laptop and Wi-Fi, and can spend all his/her time studying for classes? Or the less-privileged youth who needs to work 20 hours a week, needs

**Why do we assume that the kinds of support that are built into our current practices and institutions are somehow the appropriate default setting and that other kinds of support represent something extra?**

to help at home with younger siblings, needs to go to the library just to work on a computer, and can spend only limited time studying?

Who works harder finding an internship? The privileged student who has the social capital to ask

a well-placed neighbor for help? Or the less-privileged student who does not know anyone with the contacts to open some doors? And this does not even take into account the racism and other structural barriers that a segment of less-privileged students encounter on a daily basis.

Many of our educational institutions are structured so that the challenges faced by students of privilege are accommodated by the system, while other challenges are seen as “special accommodations.” After all, we rightly bend over backwards to enable students in French class to miss a month of classes so they can travel to France, but we penalize a student who arrives at school two hours late because his unreliable car broke down.

When I was in high school in a prosperous urban suburb, the brother of one of my classmates was in a horrible car accident that led to a horrendous situation for the family. From my perspective, it appeared that various teachers and the system automatically adjusted in a way that enabled my classmate to miss numerous classes to stay with her brother and family at the hospital, to hand in assignments late (if at all, for a while), and to give primary attention to the needs of her family. We reflexively support more privileged youth confronting this kind of crisis. Why shouldn't the system also accommodate those facing challenges due to financial need, serious problems at home, and so on?

Our approach to education is rife with accommodations that have been built into the system, whether it is a school schedule that was established in part to accommodate the needs of farmers and other workers or the assumption that all students can take unpaid but impressive internships to add luster to their resumes.

A further hidden bias built into the system is related to traditional notions about how college or graduate students and professors are expected to interact with each other. Many faculty members have internalized these expectations and feel uncomfortable discussing students' personal chal-

lenges with them, feeling that they should only discuss academic matters, with perhaps a referral to a counselor for other kinds of assistance. This unwittingly denies certain less-privileged students the opportunity to have faculty serve as part of their support network.

This traditional approach might have made sense when all students were expected to have come from financially stable backgrounds with access to extensive support networks of family, friends, and other mentors. However, it effectively makes higher education less welcoming and supportive for those from different and less-privileged backgrounds, and it defines as the norm an approach that favors certain students over others.

Rather than wondering why underperforming students are not working as hard as others, why don't we ask instead: What can our schools and institutions of higher education do to provide support and accommodation that will help all students excel in the classroom? Shouldn't that, after all, be our goal?

*Mark C. Gordon is a professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law.*

## **IMPROVE THE PRODUCT OR MAYBE IT'S MARKETING**

*By Dan Hall*

Before we discuss “What personal responsibility should mean in education?” it may make sense to start outside of the person. After all, we don't start as free-range infants. We are nurtured (or not) within families with mothers and fathers (or not). So, long before most of us know a great deal about our person, we begin to know about ourselves within our immediate community.

Given how important our immediate communities are to our understanding and development of our person, subsequent questions like, “What weight should be given to social and cultural

constraints on student performance?” are conditioned. They are conditioned by the immediate community surrounding the person.

Do we care about the keyboarding proficiency of Sami or Taureg children? Only if we intersect with them somehow—and they intersect with keyboards. The most critical question is, do Sami and Taureg adults care?

*[Editor’s note: For those who missed class that week, and with thanks to Wikipedia, the Sami people are an indigenous Finno-Ugric group inhabiting Sapmi, which today encompasses large northern parts of Norway and Sweden, northern parts of Finland, and the Kola Peninsula with the Murmansk Oblast in Russia. The Taureg people are a large Berber ethnic confederation. They principally inhabit the Sahara in a vast area stretching from far southwestern Libya to southern Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.]*

Readers could rightly argue that Sami and Taureg children likely aren’t Americans and thus we should not really care. They are far different than children living in America, after all. While I believe the case of Sami and Taureg

**Thus, we’re concerned about creating a desire for things far different and more transcendent than most anything featured in standard advertisements.**

natives are different than American children, I also believe they are only different in degrees. In America, too, we have peoples that are more removed from the larger American society. Some of these peoples are removed by their own choice and actions. Others are removed from society because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The weight given to social and cultural constraints and the weight we give to measures of student performance should be a

function of how far removed from larger American society the child’s community desires to be.

Weight, like height and width, is a measure. We can only give weight to what is measured. We only measure what is of interest and valued. If we don’t take the measure of something—numerically, aesthetically, emotionally, or in some other way—we don’t care for it. Arguably, this means that the weighting of performance and measuring performance itself make more sense when dealing with parents and communities that desire and value the academic things valued by the larger American society.

Readers could rightly argue there is an economy to support and baby-boomer Social Security and pension payments to be made. Thus, letting parents and communities and their children go their own way (and failing to embrace what we propose to measure) seems like a dangerous idea.

They are, I think, correct. But does it make sense to measure my 100-meter dash time when I’m committed to sitting in my Barcalounger?

Fortunately, in most cases, when American society offers things worth having, discriminating parents whose circumstances allow readily pursue those good things for their children and themselves. No healthy parent says, “Because we’re Dutch (or any other group), it’s okay that my child gets less or learns less.”

Thus, I think our achievement gaps and our lackluster performance on international math, science, and reading tests generally can be traced to two upstream sources. One source is the failure of the larger American society to offer what parents really want for themselves and their children. A second source is the failure of American society to ameliorate the circumstances in which some less fortunate parents find themselves.

If we hope to improve student achievement significantly, we need to improve the product we’re marketing and/or the marketing itself. And, if/

when we have a product that parents, communities, and children want, it will become difficult to keep students from learning and to keep systems from responding.

An important caveat: The product we market can't be a thing (or things) in the traditional sense. If a child wants a car, they'll need a new one before they reach their 40th birthday. Thus, we're concerned about creating a desire for things far different and more transcendent than most anything featured in standard advertisements.

*Dan Hall, a Republican from Burnsville, represents SD56 in the Minnesota Senate.*

## HIGH RATES OF ABSENTEEISM ARE INIMICAL TO LEARNING

*By Jake Haulk*

There is little doubt, nor should there be, that high rates of absenteeism from school are associated with and cause poor academic achievement, school dropouts and myriad socioeconomic ills that stem from large numbers of young people who are unqualified for all but menial jobs.

Yet the problem of high levels of chronic absenteeism in the United States persists despite study after study and numerous and expensive efforts to combat the problem. It is an indictment of educators and legislatures and governors in states with schools where the problem is preposterously bad. After all, mandatory school attendance is the law across the country, and there are criminal liabilities for parents of truants. Considering the taxpayer dollars being expended on education and the lack of learning that results from skimpy attendance by large numbers of students, it is safe to say that vast numbers of tax dollars are, for all intents and purposes, being wasted. Yet the attendance issue fails to grab headlines or the public outrage that it should.

Report after report shows U.S. students far down the list of countries ranked by academic achieve-

ment, despite spending per student far above the rest of the world. In itself, that should be a red flag for all who believe more dollars is the answer.

The U.S. Department of Education looked at the attendance issue to determine why attendance, in so many schools, is atrocious. A recent DOE study, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools," based on 2015-16 school year statistics, lists poor

**When large numbers of students, 25 percent or more, are chronically absent, the classroom becomes almost useless for educational purposes.**

health, inadequate transportation, and a lack of school safety as factors causing high absenteeism. Interestingly, the report ignores the responsibility of parents to get their children up and ready for school. Of course, this is not surprising, given the massive increase in households headed by single moms, many of whom are poorly educated themselves.

Equally important is the lack of intellectual curiosity in far too many homes where reading is not encouraged and TV-watching and electronic games are the diversions of choice. Discipline is not taught at home, so when teachers and classrooms attempt to impose discipline and good order, they are rejected or endured with hostility.

No doubt, some students who are bullied will be reluctant to go to school. That speaks volumes about principals and teachers who do not punish bullying. Yet as we have learned from teachers, many of them are themselves abused and disrespected by students. In short, discipline in schools has been sacrificed to political correctness, and that begets even worse problems.

When large numbers of students, 25 percent or more, are chronically absent, the classroom becomes almost useless for educational purposes. When students are not in class, they miss the



teacher's explanations, they miss assignments, they miss exams, and they fall hopelessly behind. So, when they come to class, they are likely to be uninterested, out of touch with what the class has been studying, and disruptive for the students who want to learn.

As examples, consider two 6-12 grade schools in the Pittsburgh district with extraordinarily poor attendance and their scoring on state achievement tests. In one of the schools only 40 percent of students were regular attendees—that is, those who attended at least 90 percent of scheduled school days, based on a 180-day academic year. Or said another way 60 percent missed 19 or more days in the latest school year.

The overall attendance rate figure (average percentage in attendance for the 180 days) suggests many students were absent 30 or more days during the school year. In this school, 20 percent scored proficient in English Language Arts-reading, and only 11 percent scored proficient in math. Well over 70 percent of graduates are functionally illiterate and innumerate. But large percentages expect to be accepted by a college—and sadly will be. Remember: This atrocity occurs despite school district spending of \$25,000 per student.

At the other dreadful grade 6-12 school, 21 percent of students score proficient in English and only nine percent in math. Only 50 percent of students were regular attendees. On the other hand, at the city's premier magnet 6-12 school, 83 percent of students are regular attendees with 86 percent proficient in English and 62 percent in math.

Consider, however, that in a suburb, a 9-12 grade high school with 94 percent regular attendees and annual expenditures of \$17,000 per student had 94 percent proficient in English and 90 percent in math.

It is not hunger. Pittsburgh schools offer free breakfasts and free lunches. And rather than absentees being concerned about safety, it is likely

that the students with high absenteeism rates are major causes of disruption and safety issues.

No doubt, the Pittsburgh examples are repeated in much of the country. Political correctness and societal breakdown are the real culprits. And no one wants to tackle them. It will get worse.

One thing is unarguable: High rates of absenteeism are inimical to learning. Indeed, it is a virtual proxy for what ails most failing schools.

*Jake Haulk is president emeritus of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy in Pittsburgh, PA.*

## **RESIDING ON THE BOTTOM RUNG OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

*By Dave Kornecki*

Education can mean any number of things and is dependent on who you are and where you sit. To the academic, it's everything, ongoing and never-ending. Professionals see it as a milestone expected for one to enter their profession. To one generation, it's a hatch for their kin to escape to a better life. While some may view it simply as a means to an end, others could care less.

This is not an exhaustive list of views on education and its relative value. Yet, one thing is certain, all individuals who find themselves confronted with their own educational pursuits either see it through to one of many conclusions or walk away at any given time. This is a personal decision, and can be made deliberately or lightly, consciously or not. No matter the choice, people are personally responsible for their own education. For some, it is within reach; for far too many, it simply is not.

I value education deeply and hold up the intellectually curious. My hope is that my kids will also value education and take personal responsibility to pursue it. No matter what their professional or



career ambitions are, I hope they see it as a noble pursuit, worthy regardless of the ROI.

As parents, my wife and I were recently confronted with a significant decision: Where should we send our kids to school? We chose our local community school for a variety of reasons, but one of the main drivers is that our community values

**To pursue any education adequately basic needs must be met, many of which, especially for the young, are out of their control.**

education, highlighted by several metrics. Test scores: We are near the top in our district. Parent engagement, measured by volunteering and fundraising, is nearly unmatched. On the surface, when comparing our school to others, it is clear our community places a high value on education. It made me wonder, why don't other communities simply place a higher value on education, take responsibility for pursuing it, and enjoy the tangible outcomes related to attainment?

Four words quickly surfaced in response—Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Breaking down our community by zip code, we reside in one of the wealthiest zip codes in Minneapolis. With great wealth comes the ability to secure our most basic of human needs—food, water, housing, safety—as well as pursue and secure relationships and goals to satisfy our psychological needs. We can provide our kids an environment where they can take the long view, and never worry about their short-term needs like food and security.

To pursue any education adequately basic needs must be met, many of which, especially for the young, are out of their control. How much personal responsibility can they place on their own educational pursuits? None, if we are truly honest.

Education is and always has been for the well

off. Prior to K-12 public education in the United States and greater access to college via the GI Bill, education was only afforded to the wealthy. Today, the skyrocketing costs of higher education, especially the most elite education settings, coupled with the degradation of the high school diploma, shows how this is still true today, and the cycle continues unabated.

When the idea of taking personal responsibility for educational pursuits is raised, what comes to mind is not people who are already achieving it, but those who can't, haven't, or are at risk of being thwarted. For that reason, significant weight should be placed on those students and their families that live in impoverished and at-risk communities, where education attainment has the probability to be lower. The educational institutions in these communities are confronted with issues that are beyond the school district's control.

For example, one out of 10 students in Minneapolis is homeless. A principal or superintendent can't control securing an adequate neighborhood grocery store or a family's ability to access it. While schools have started serving breakfast and lunch, meals are needed at night and on weekends, too. Principals also cannot protect every kid walking home or at home. If education is a pursuit of the highest order, the mind, how can we expect teachers to tap into it when necessities of the body aren't met, such as sleep, security, and food?

Taking personal responsibility and working hard regardless is hyperbole coming from people who have an education and have never resided on the bottom rung of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In order to achieve greater educational outcomes, students need to be free from having to worry about their basic needs. A concerted and holistic community approach that serves to secure basic needs, similar to Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, is needed, and it's the responsibility of all of us to achieve this. Otherwise, simply stating that families and their kids need to take on more responsibility as an objective will fall as

flat as the depth of understanding from which the statement stems.

*Dave Kornecki was committee administrator for the Higher Education & Workforce Development Committee in the Minnesota Senate from 2013 to 2017.*

## IGNITING A THIRST FOR TRUE WISDOM

*By Ken Lewis*

We certainly have huge problems in America's educational system today. We seem to have a numbing amount of information available everywhere, but in many cases its quality is suspect, and the initiative of some of the students to raise the spoon from the bowl of education to their own mouth seems to be lacking.

Perhaps the problem goes deeper than the obvious challenges we face with faulty instructors, lethargic students, and highly deficient curricula. Perhaps it presents itself in how we see ourselves, in how we form our identity.

In an address to the Acton Institute, Dr. Timothy Keller refers to a book by philosopher Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. (The whole address is available on YouTube.) Keller reminds us that our identity grows out of three questions: 1) To what do I aspire? 2) What am I worth? and 3) Who is to say?

Keller pointed out that, according to Taylor, traditional identity begins when we first seek wisdom from a source greater than ourselves outside our being and then apply it to our inner self. Those higher sources may be God, or patriotism, history's great minds, or the literature of the ages. The traditionalist then takes that acquired treasure and moves inward, comparing what the individual finds in his own heart with the precepts discovered on his outward journey, applying the higher wisdom to his own performance. The individual is

evaluated in that mirror. It judges him. It corrects him. It has the right to say.

This pathway used to be the goal of higher education. Therein lies much of our problem.

There is also today's dominant modern identity standing in contrast to the traditional one. Modern identity formation begins inside one's self and only then moves outward. In that initial step, the individual ascertains answers to questions such as "Who am I? What are my values or my deepest desires or dreams? What is 'truth' to me?" Having answered those questions for themselves, they then journey outward, and approach their culture, insisting it accommodate them. They, after all, are the standard. They alone are the one to say. The modern identity finds value only in that which helps achieve personal goals and desires.

**When I and my feelings and desires are the standard, who cares what Shakespeare wrote? What can Plato, Marie Curie, George Washington Carver or the Apostle Paul possibly teach me?**

While the traditional identity is defined by the duties, the modern identity, by exalting its own inner being is defined by desires. Keller points out that to the traditional identity, higher external standards or sources are more real than one's feelings. To the modern, their feelings and desires are supreme, authentic, and real. Clearly in today's world, the modern identity is dominant and defines our culture. We can no more avoid being affected by it than a fish in the ocean can avoid being wet.

Can we see how such an epistemological framework has a huge effect on education? When I and my feelings and desires are the standard, who cares what Shakespeare wrote? What can Plato, Marie Curie, George Washington Carver or the Apostle Paul possibly teach me? I will study him or anyone else only if I personally find him interesting or helpful.

Or in order to feed my desires if I have drunk deeply from the stream of intersectionality, then I will pay attention only to those who share my intersectional characteristics, refusing, for instance, to do anything but critique any who are not my gender, sexual preference, or ethnicity or who have sufficiently kowtowed to my intersectional trump cards.

A major problem in today's educational banquet is indeed the quality of course material arrayed before the learners. We also have a problem with motivation and initiative. Yet an even greater problem is that too many are like the citizens of Laodicea whom the Apostle John addressed in Revelation 3, "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,' not realizing that you are wretched, poor, pitiable, blind, and naked."

The problem was born at the very beginning, as we formed our identity, when we first went inside and first consulted our desires and our dreams and were told by many to follow our heart. And when confronted with the question, "Who is to say?" we boldly answered, "Only I am!" We would have done much better consulting Someone else first and then, thusly humbled, carrying those hot coals inside, igniting a thirst for true wisdom.

*Ken Lewis was a pastor in Baptist General Conference churches in the Upper Midwest for 40 years before retiring.*

## THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MAINSTREAMING

*By George W. Liebmann*

Anyone assessing the very appropriate questions posed by the organizers of this symposium should focus on an underappreciated piece of federal legislation: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, passed during the first Bush administration. While the disabilities act for adults was a humane measure resulting in sidewalks and transit

services more hospitable to the elderly, its juvenile counterpart, though enacted with the best of intentions, has had nothing but malign effects.

**Because of mainstreaming, it is impractical for schools to maintain two systems of discipline, one for disabled and one for ordinary students.**

The IDEA legislation was indeed a bad idea. The least of its defects was that it is a classic unfunded mandate, the federal government providing only a small fraction of funds needed for its implementation. Its chief defect was its flawed theory, mandating the "mainstreaming" of the developmentally disabled in ordinary classrooms. Mainstreaming had been launched in Britain by the social philosopher Lady Mary Warnock. Her subsequent repudiation of it after years of experience in the U.K. passed unnoticed in the United States. Its effect has frequently been to saddle classroom teachers with incapable or disruptive students who operate as a drag on classroom progress.

Even more remarkably, such funds as are provided by the federal government and required to be provided by the states are not devoted at all to the hiring of teachers, but rather to the hiring of bureaucrats to prepare the individual development plans required by the legislation. Worse still, parents are encouraged to seek the designation of children as "disabled" to secure this extra attention, causing numbers and costs to multiply.

Since the statute has been designated as a "civil rights" law, parents are encouraged to sue school districts by the Civil Rights Attorney's Fees Award Act, providing for one-way fee shifting. Even partially successful suits result in awards of tens of thousands of dollars in attorneys' fees, which cause smaller school districts to fold in the face of threatened litigation, which costs larger districts millions annually.

The worst single provision in the act is its restraints on school discipline. Procedures going well beyond the constitutional minimum are required in order to discipline “disabled” students, and the definition of disability has been extended to include the “emotionally disabled”—i.e., the disruptive. Because of mainstreaming, it is impractical for schools to maintain two systems of discipline, one for disabled and one for ordinary students. The federal standards and threat of one-way fee-shifting thus undermine discipline of all students.

In the late 1990s when this deficiency began to appear, former U.S. Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA) made a strenuous effort to repeal the discipline provisions, which failed by only two votes in the Senate. This effort deserves to be renewed.

Schools, in the last analysis, as the late George Kennan heretically observed, exist to serve educational purposes, not social ones. The most deprived groups, in any case, need and are benefitted by discipline.

Other issues addressed in this symposium cannot be dealt with in this short compass. One deserves to be mentioned: The educational effects of broken families and the “feminization of poverty.” This, together with the demise of “shotgun weddings,” as the distinguished economists Janet Yellen and George Akerlof bravely observed in 1996 in two articles in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and the *Brookings Review*, is in considerable measure due to the sexual carelessness resulting from the judicially decreed liberalization of the laws governing abortion. Which, contrary to the expectations of its advocates, has exploded the number of out-of-wedlock births and one-parent families.

*George W. Liebmann is a Baltimore lawyer and the author of a number of historical works, most recently America’s Political Inventors (Bloomsbury 2019).*

## LITTLE LEFT THAT HASN’T BEEN TRIED

*By Heather Mac Donald*

I am often asked, when I speak about education and the seemingly intractable achievement gap, “What can we do to close that gap?” I have concluded that this is the wrong question.

“We”—meaning the society at large, filled with well-meaning adults who yearn to live in a post-racial society and want nothing more than racial equality in educational attainment—have been

**It is up to leaders in the black community to fight back against the anti-acting white ethic, which tells black and Hispanic students that they are betraying their race if they try hard in school.**

trying for decades to raise black performance through a dizzying array of costly initiatives, each issued to great fanfare: accountability for schools, various testing schemes, vouchers, charters, more funding, in-class technology, alternative methods of discipline, anti-Eurocentric curricula, multicultural math, more diverse teachers, ethnic studies, anti-whiteness training for teachers and students, onsite social services, after-school tutoring, preschool, visiting nurses, and a pedagogy that is even more student-centered than at present (if such a thing were possible).

At this point, there is very little that “we” can do that hasn’t already been tried. The responsibility for closing the achievement gap now rests with the students themselves and their parents. The public has been kept almost wholly in the dark about the condition of the average inner-city classroom: the lack of respect shown teachers, the failure to do homework or take textbooks home, the singing, chanting, and walking around, the fights, the backs to the blackboard, the heads on the desks, the ear-



buds ineradicably implanted.

Those problems are exacerbated by the falsehood that school discipline is racist, which makes teachers reluctant to punish insubordination. If children are not being socialized by their parents (with parents usually in the singular), swift and certain consequences for violating school rules are the last chance for molding individuals with self-control and respect for authority.

The battle rages on over whether members of the most liberal profession in the country—teaching—are disciplining black students out of implicit bias (a patently ludicrous proposition), rather than in response to actual instances of misbehavior. The fact remains, however, that this misguided attack on teacher authority would not matter if students arrived in the classroom with a basic respect for education. It is up to leaders in the black community to fight back against the anti-acting white ethic, which tells black and Hispanic students that they are betraying their race if they try hard in school.

Those leaders should be holding up the models of Frederick Douglass, who immersed himself in a collection of 18th century British speeches as a 12-year-old, of W. E. B. Du Bois, who reveled in his affinity for great literature, of Booker T. Washington, who stressed the capacity of blacks to lift themselves out of poverty through hard work and self-discipline, and of Ralph Ellison, who read deeply in modernist literature as a child.

They should call on students to revere learning and books and to spend as much time on homework as they do on their smart phones. They should argue that the best revenge against an allegedly racist society is to beat it at its own game by outperforming everyone else. Parents should adopt that message as well and back it up by monitoring homework and test scores and making sure that their children are at home at night, not on the streets.

Until families and communities take responsibility for education, there is no school reform left to try that will close the achievement gap.

*Heather Mac Donald is the Thomas W. Smith Fellow at the Manhattan Institute.*

## “WHY DO SOME KIDS MAKE IT AND SOME DON’T?”

*By Roy Magnuson*

“Why do some kids make it and some don’t?” was a question raised in a 1993 National Public Radio documentary entitled “Ghetto Life 101.” The speaker raising the question was LeAlan Jones, at the time a 14-year-old living in the Robert Taylor Homes on Chicago’s South Side. LeAlan and his neighborhood friend Lloyd Newman were given quality recording gear and were encouraged and supported to make a documentary about the subject they knew best: themselves. In the process of sharing a great deal of their lives, they explored their relationships with family, neighborhood, and school.

They shared how school for them was many things—a refuge, a destination, a place to seek out, a place many avoided. It was a place where clowning occurred, where teachers taught in spite of plenty of lacks—lack of supplies, lack of quality space, lack of student enthusiasm and cooperation, lack of public validation, and so on.

But—where some made it, some didn’t.

Expectations are quirky things. Too often in the United States, we have shifted our educational expectations almost exclusively to the side of teachers and institutions while virtually leaving individual students out of the discussion. But education is a transformative experience—when one learns, a change occurs. Sometimes the proof of the change is easily ascertained. You can show that you truly know how to change the tire on a car by doing so and driving off successfully.

But there are *want-to*’s in the tire changing process: *want-to* save money, *want-to* not be stranded in one’s current locale, *want-to* loosen the lug nuts,



want-to set the jack in the correct spot and use it successfully, removing, replacing and re-tightening the tire. There is pride in leaving the scene successfully.

Why do some make it and some don't?

Teachers, parents, family members, mentors, coaches: They all matter. But just like changing a tire is not a passive event, learning is not passive. Learning is doing. As a society, we all too often move too far on the continuum toward doing *for*, rather than actually helping someone to *do*. We do this with good intentions. To honor the impact of past wrongs and injustices, to make a short-term leap, to protect the reputation of the learning institution, to facilitate a situation. There are many reasons, but just like a solitary person on the road alone at night can only change the flat tire by himself, sometimes we forget the change that is learning is accomplished by the individual and, if retained, retained by the individual.

**As a society, we all too often move too far on the continuum toward doing for, rather than actually helping someone to do. We do this with good intentions.**

Again, why do some make it in some settings and others don't?

Teachers cannot open heads and pour in knowledge. They can create structure, they can provide support, they can try to meet students where the students are at, teachers can create curriculum roadmaps, build skill practice sessions, and mix all of this with support, love, appropriate firmness and encouragement, and inevitably some students will make it and some won't.

That's today.

Tomorrow might be different. Tomorrow might be the day that the connection is made, the "light bulb" goes on, and for a different student, school

now makes sense and the path seems clear.

Some people find personal rewards in the joy of learning, in the affirmation that they receive from peers and adults. Some have an ability to see the long view—comments about "when you are older" resonate because they plan on being older. They have a future in their own mind—maybe not the one that will happen, but one that guides today and tomorrow's decisions and keeps them engaged in school and learning. Some see the next day's game, practice or performance as an incentive. There are a lot of reasons—most of them about being connected.

But something inside must be nurtured. Some spark must be kept lit and fueled. That is the individual's job.

And it is our job. All of ours. One student, one person at a time.

Why do some make it and others don't?

Lloyd Newman in his acceptance speech for a Peabody Award commented that he wasn't sure what was more impressive, the award or having just turned 18.

Why do some make it and others don't?

As a lawyer, a volunteer outside linebacker coach, and a guardian for younger family members, Le-Alan Jones ran as the Illinois Green Party candidate for a U.S. Senate seat—Barack Obama's seat.

Why do some make it and others don't?

Individual effort, group support. Grit and determination. All easy answers that we can generally accept.

The hard answer sometimes also is good fortune and the willingness to accept it. And, maybe, the good fortune not to have bad luck.

*After a multi-decade career as an urban teacher*

and coach in a St. Paul high school, Roy Magnuson is now the public information officer for the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office.

## PREPARING THE CHILD FOR THE ROAD, NOT THE ROAD FOR THE CHILD

By *Geoffrey Maruyama  
and Katherine Galligan*

What does hard work and taking responsibility mean in this digital age? We start with anecdotes to frame our comments and thoughts.

A colleague who coached a winless youth hockey team going into the end-of-year tournament was astonished when a player asked him “the size of the trophy” they would get for participating.

A college student employee, when told by his supervisor of other responsibilities of the job, replied, “No thanks, I’m good with what I’m doing.” After being told that these were job requirements, repeated, “No thanks, I’m good.”

Clearly, the world is different from the past, for we now know and can worry about issues as diverse as Middle Eastern (and other) terrorism, nuclear weapons in North Korea and maybe Iran, aggressive behaviors from and demonization of Ameri-

**What has changed to get us to a point where many youth believe that overcoming challenges should be done by getting help or advantages?**

cans by places including Russia, and school shootings and increased extremes in weather events at home and elsewhere. Nevertheless, we live in times no more and in many ways less dangerous than in the past.

Reality is overwhelmed, however, by unrelenting

visibility through the internet of the sheer scope of possible dangers in our lives, triggering protective urges in family. Parents have been called “helicopter parents,” “snowplow parents,” “Tiger Moms,” and coddlers. Heightened protective parenting produces children who are less independent, who take less initiative, who are less demanding of themselves in work and study, are more reliant on others, and who may therefore expect to succeed regardless of how they behave.

What has changed to get us to a point where many youth believe that overcoming challenges should be done by getting help or advantages? Recent books *iGen* by Jean M. Twenge and *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt suggest that family behaviors in the digital age (youth born after 1995) have created youth who take less responsibility and who expect help and support that creates weakness and dependence—rather than independence, responsibility, and resilience, and who are growing up more slowly and perhaps less completely than youth in years past.

Twenge finds that youth today interact more through social media and less through face-to-face interaction and thus spend less time initiating, organizing, and participating in peer-led activities. She argues that the internet feeds and enhances adolescent insecurities through persistent negative social comparisons with peers with more social media friends and who post on Instagram how wonderful their lives are. Further, the digital age amplifies direct and indirect aggressive attacks on others, due both to impersonality of online attacks and decreased civility in society today.

Lukianoff and Haidt point to lesser preparation for taking responsibility and to society teaching youth to deal with challenges and lack of success by asking for extra privileges and opportunities. Youth learn that their failure is not about them but rather about a system that makes them feel bad and that is not sufficiently supportive. They suggest that youth are weakened by challenges rather than strengthened by overcoming challenges.

Consistent with their theorizing, recent increases in numbers of students seeking mental health services throughout their education years are dramatic and lead to accommodations that provide extra opportunities (e.g., extended time for testing). Although many instances are legitimate and represent improvements addressing issues of mental health and allowing youth to demonstrate their actual abilities, others provide students with an edge, giving them advantages in their performance compared to peers. Lukianoff and Haidt further argue that young people today believe that they should not have to feel bad, and that fault belongs with those who provide negative feedback.

Research 50 years ago on achievement motivation established that people with the highest motivation to achieve success seek tasks with moderate likelihoods of success rather than extremely difficult or extremely easy tasks. In former instances outcomes are shaped by and reflect their performance; in latter instances the task largely determines the outcome. We need to get youth today to challenge themselves by seeking out and taking on tasks of moderate difficulty, where their behavior determines their success or failure, and to accept and learn from failure as well as success.

Today's popular psychological constructs include Motivation (driven to succeed), Resilience (able to overcome obstacles), Growth Mindset (recognizing importance of effort), and Grit (focusing on long-term important goals). Instilling them in youth requires parents, families, teachers, and communities to allow children to fail, to struggle, to strive for long-term goals, to recognize that they largely are responsible for their failures as well as their successes, and to find their own ways of succeeding. Repeating a folk aphorism used by Lukianoff and Haidt, *prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child*.

So, what might adult policymakers and practitioners do?

- Recognize how the digital age has reshaped behavior, and teach children that they are

responsible for what they do and say, online as well as face to face.

- Create opportunities to build responsibility in children and youth, encouraging them to rely first on themselves to solve and address their challenges.
- Help children develop capacities to overcome obstacles and unexpected outcomes, and to accept and learn from failure as well as success. Research on learning and feedback has shown that we can learn much from our failures, for a mind that always gets what it expects is not forced to reflect and change.
- Give youth tasks of moderate difficulty, where their behavior determines their success or failure.

To succeed, we need to blend together what we know from research and practice to increase motivation, initiative, and personal responsibility in order to create youth who develop internal capacity to overcome obstacles and outcomes that disappoint them and who succeed through hard work.

*Geoffrey Maruyama, a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota, has conducted research on student achievement for over 40 years. Katherine Galligan is principal of consumer insights and strategy at Galligan & Associates.*

## WEIGHING THE VALUE OF A RISKY INVESTMENT

*By Bryce McNitt*

The prompt begs the question of what it is, precisely, for which one is taking responsibility. Education itself? Or some other end: a viable future, a job, or for the most fortunate, a career? If education were an end-in-itself, responsibility would simply mean showing up to class, completing exams, and paying tuition. But it is not the end-in-itself, and while that may seem self-evident to readers of this symposium, the idea that education is itself the goal remains surprisingly prevalent.

It is surprising, because from 1985 to 2016, the price of a four-year college degree rose by a staggering 112 percent after controlling for inflation. Over the same period, real median household income grew just 17 percent. The return on investment in a college education has been dropping steadily, and that's before factoring over the same period the rapid rise in the cost of health care, childcare, and, in urban areas, housing. Unsurprisingly, social mobility has plummeted alongside these factors, dropping 70 percent in the past half-century. In 1970, 90 percent of 30 year olds could expect to earn more than their parents at the same age; today, it's a coin toss.

Populism, anyone?

Under this frame, rising through income tiers for young people without \$100,000 in parental cash on hand to pay for higher education is either a high-stakes gamble or a non-starter. The barriers, in terms of costs, are staggering. For people who succeed in securing an advanced degree and a six-figure income shortly thereafter, the gamble

**As we enter a new decade, let's be clear-eyed that personal responsibility in education may mean making the choice not to pursue it.**

pays off in the long run, though the associated debt load may still take 20 years to pay down or at least force a tradeoff between debt paydown, family creation, and home buying. The economic future for those who don't succeed or can't translate an advanced degree into a high salary quickly is nipped in the bud with an inescapable debt that will balloon over the decades.

In this environment, personal responsibility means weighing the value of a risky investment in an uncertain world. It may mean, even for the brightest among us, or perhaps especially for the brightest among us, selecting out of further education and settling for a more modest source

of income free from the prospect of life-long debt. That is to say, the current environment lays bare the myth of meritocracy in this country—of access to opportunity.

It would be unsurprising, then, that in a few short years all student debts were forgiven, that four-year degrees at public institutions were free, or that universities were liable for part or all of the loans that fund their programs, with the government having retreated from the field. Will any of that help? It's hard to say, but we know where our current path leads. Considering the bitterness of the medicine being called for today, the time for a smooth course correction is well passed.

As we enter a new decade, let's be clear-eyed that personal responsibility in education may mean making the choice not to pursue it. Let's be clear that the longer this remains true—the harder it becomes for the brightest among us to rise to the top—the more like the ossified societies in Russia and China we become. And remember, too, to carry a bit of humility with you as you haggle over a new car or chat with the manager of the sock department at the sporting goods store—they may have been the next Einstein, if they'd just had a crack at it.

*Bryce McNitt is chief of staff at a financial regulator in Washington, D.C.*

## **EDUCATION FOR PARENTS FROM THE POINT OF CONCEPTION**

*By Rhonda Kruse Nordin*

The alarm clock went off without fail. My sister rolled over, silenced the buzzer then nudged me. Quickly we rose, donned our work clothes, and, depending on the season, added jackets or boots, and trekked out to the barnyard for chores. Cold air nipped at our cheeks. Mostly I recall the darkness, yet we knew the well-worn path that led from the corncrib (where we'd carefully



measured oats and corn and protein pellets) to the barn, where we left the pails of feed each morning for my father to pour for the cattle.

Our task completed, we raced to the farmhouse that was aglow with light where a warm breakfast awaited. If we hurried, we could eat, change into school clothes, and make it to the end of our lane before the big yellow bus arrived. It was, by then, nearly daylight.

**Over past decades, my sister and I have pondered the rationale behind our “before school chore-duty.”**

Over past decades, my sister and I have pondered the rationale behind our “before school chore-duty.” My father, we knew, could easily have measured the grain and carried it across the barnyard himself; it might have taken him a scant five minutes and saved us our mad scramble each morning. Yet, we knew that his doing so might also have spared us a lesson in responsibility that has played out well throughout our lives. We merely did our chores without question, just as we prepared for school each day, did our homework, studied for tests, and behaved in ways responsible and fair. It was what was expected: It was the way things were done. To shirk responsibility or question it was unacceptable. Disappointing my father: unthinkable.

Unfortunately, many students today grow up without a father to enforce “chore-duty” and certainly without a barnyard as the backdrop for teaching responsibility. According to 2016 figures compiled for National Kids Count, 35 percent of children under 18 years of age live in single-parent households, the bulk without a father figure, which puts roughly 18 million-plus boys and girls at greater risk for a host of life challenges. Not only are they more likely to live in poverty, they are more vulnerable than children growing up with two parents to about every imaginable hardship, including developmental delays, lower academic achievement and performance, poor

behavioral and mental health, depression, obesity, and general wellbeing.

Why are we surprised, then, when these students struggle at school?

Many factors, of course, influence student achievement. However, the most significant is tied to parental support—parents making sure, as in my father’s case, that a child is responsible, arrives at school on time, is well-rested, well-fed, and ready to learn. It is a parent that sets expectations and good examples for the student and casts education in a positive light.

My father would have said we kids needed to “take advantage of the opportunities for education that we were offered.” In other words, we were not entitled to an education. To squander the “opportunity to learn,” regardless of its perceived quality, was unacceptable. If we weren’t learning, it would have been assumed that it was not due to the material or the teacher or the methods of teaching (as is too often the case today) but to our own meager efforts.

We know that many students today grow up in environments less conducive than ideal to educational attainment. However, we also know that many students do well despite their less-than-ideal living conditions. At some point, therefore, we do need to ask for increased ownership on the part of both students and their parents: Student success can be possible, we know, regardless adverse circumstances.

Scholars recognize that we can direct “all the money in the world” toward educational reforms to fix perceived educational disparities; however, little improvement will be made until students themselves make a reasonable effort to work hard and do the work. It’s what should be expected of them—their job, per se, for this particular period in their lives.

Not only must we demand increased individual accountability from students, we need to



## TEACHING TRUTH, EXERCISING JUDGMENT, CULTIVATING RESPONSIBILITY

*By Bob Osburn*

put more emphasis on parental responsibility. I believe we are too soft on and demand too little from those who can make the biggest difference, especially in the lives of under-performing students. Many parents stumble with this, of course, not because they don't care, but because they lack the necessary know-how and tools. Establishing programs—some already exist—designed with this in mind.

There may be few mandates that ensure student success, but one remains clear across all populations, regardless of race, creed, or color. In 50 different studies on parental engagement, education researchers find a direct link between parent involvement and student success. The earlier it starts, and the more extensive it is, the better.

I believe we need, right from the git-go, education for parents—not when children start school, but from the point of conception—that emphasizes the importance of parents in the lives of their children. Parents count: Parenthood inspires hard work, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice in a common project intended to provide support and structure so that a child can be ready for school, succeed in school, and later make a contribution to society.

This might sound daunting or even foolish in its simplicity. We continue to focus on “fixing” perceived housing, employment, income, health, and justice disparities. Yet until we adapt a mindset within the home that parents count, I'm not sure we have a fighting chance to see the student outcomes we so need and desire.

*Rhonda Kruse Nordin writes about family issues.*

Truth and grace, love and judgment, rights and responsibilities. Education that wisely values the balance inherent in these couplets will produce the neighbors we want to join us in making the good society.

For many decades American educators have abandoned these time-tested couplets in favor of utopian theories that prioritize only grace, love, and personal rights in order to create self-fulfilled citizens, not virtuous neighbors. Thus, we have slowly edged away from teaching truth, exercising judgment, and cultivating responsibility—all three of which are necessary for a society that cherishes excellence and character and where citizens take ownership for the common good.

Simply put, sacred scripture and history teach us that creating good neighbors requires the couplets in full measure and especially discipline and support in equal measure. Thus, public education ought to teach skills for discovering the truth while also developing the character of children.

Yet why, in the late dawn of the 21st century, are public educators and others who shape young lives falling over themselves to emphasize love over judgment, grace over truth, rights over responsibilities? Because we are taught, in a thousand and one ways, the wrong story about our purpose in life—namely, that human beings must be autonomous, independent self-creators, seeking their own fulfillment rather than searching for truth. Education nurtures the self rather than carefully cultivating the healthy society. Personal success takes precedence over communal sustenance. And why? Perhaps because we lost the Founders' realization that, to survive, a republic requires virtuous, knowledgeable citizens.

The problem is that, over time, the personal fulfillment story leads to one conclusion: growing anarchy, which inevitably invites its opposite, tyranny, as savior. Consider these facts about most of our public schools: Children who lack self-control and character regularly disrupt classes to the point that teachers must evacuate the rest of their classes to hallways. Meanwhile, trained school personnel must move in to corral and calm these out-of-control juveniles who may be throwing desks and books, even assaulting teachers. And all because we have fondled grace at the expense of truth, love at the expense of judgment, and rights over responsibilities.

**Will our religious leaders recover the courage to say “No!” when everyone else shouts, “Make yourself whatever you want!”?**

Can we restore the historic balance among these couplets, and, if so, how? For the sake of my grandchildren, I hope the answer to the former is “yes.” Our culture-shaping institutions are best equipped to right the ship of society, but our public schools are part of the problem we want them to solve. Who will step into this void?

So, as a first answer to the “How?” question, I ask: Will our religious leaders recover the courage to say “No!” when everyone else shouts, “Make yourself whatever you want!”? Religion is key to creating virtuous citizens. Why do religious leaders hide their light under a bushel?

Besides the role of religious leaders, our progressive academics also share responsibility. They ought to welcome voices of virtue that bring balance to our couplets. It’s time for faculty hiring committees to welcome faculty who may shake up the progressive apple cart. Postmodern academics ought to ask themselves whether their disdain for “truth” will create a society that courageously searches for it.

Second, a group of like-minded influential leaders from different sectors of society must strategize how to win over policymakers who cater to the drumbeat of personal fulfillment instead of personal responsibility. The legal profession must reconsider its one-sided emphasis on individual rights that handcuffs responsible adults who should manage out-of-control children.

Third, school choice will empower the private sector in education to come forward with some of what it does best: making virtuous citizens. Why do so many policymakers fight school choice tooth and nail?

Fourth, rediscovering the virtuous balance between truth and grace, love and judgment, rights and responsibilities will also need the public leadership of one person who, out of great sacrifice, champions this idea and captures the public imagination with it.

Finally, we need writers who will craft a new story that captures the public imagination, a story of self-giving and personal sacrifice instead of personal fulfillment and maximized rights. Film makers, song writers, and journalists: Why not step up to this plate and leave behind the thin, wishy-washy gruel that disdains the traditional couplets that sustain the good society?

Until and unless public virtue becomes as big a priority as personal fulfillment, via efforts I’ve proposed, we will continue to graduate from our institutions students who are consumers rather than creators, coddled rather than courageous, vicious rather than virtuous, slackers rather than saints. We will not create the responsible neighbors we want and need.

*Bob Osburn has worked around the University of Minnesota for 34 years, both as a campus minister and, for seven years, as an adjunct lecturer in the College of Education and Human Development.*

## A GRUELING HABITUATION OF THE WILL

*By Elliot Polsky*

The liberal arts core curriculum still trumpeted by elite universities as what sets them above the technical schools and community colleges—and justifies their exorbitant tuition—increasingly resembles not only a vestigial structure but a burst appendix. In light of the crisis of high student classroom absences, lower quality work, and miraculously stable grade point averages, university administrators and faculty may take a lesson about classroom incentives from the 13th-century theology professor Thomas Aquinas and the 19th-century classicist John Henry Newman.

In Newman's day, it was becoming a trendy idea that, if only England would construct public libraries, the raptures of reading Sir Isaac Newton and ecstasies of learning chemistry would usher in a new dawn of virtue to the hitherto carnal and vice-ridden populace of the empire. In his essay, "The Tamworth Reading Room," Newman warned against the temptation to think that the small pleasures of learning would suffice to draw the lower passions away from sin. For virtue, one needs not only the intellect but the will.

A similar point can be drawn from Thomas Aquinas's philosophical psychology, which, although developed by a medieval theologian wholly ignorant of modern biology, is still a respected philosophical theory championed by such leading contemporary philosophers as Elizabeth Anscombe, Anthony Kenny, John Haldane, and Edward Feser. In Aquinas's thought, the intellect can be said to enjoy knowledge only in the very distant, metaphorical sense in which rocks "enjoy" falling and books "enjoy" being read. The purpose of the intellect is to know things, true enough. But if a person takes pleasure in gaining new knowledge, it isn't the intellect itself that is smiling. Rather, it is the will and the bodily appetites that literally enjoy things—that feel pleasure. Even when the intellect, in heaven, learns the nature of God, it is the will

that enjoys this knowledge, not the intellect.

All this suggests a serious problem in the incentive structures of contemporary higher education. For whatever reason—legal or philosophical—universities seem to have, with few exceptions, embraced the funny idea that the best way to get students to learn is not to punish or challenge, but to entice. Students will want to study if only what they are taught is made fun, easy, and (most of all) "relevant." Thus, teachers are forced to pimp out their classes with eye-catching titles,

**Thus, teachers are forced to pimp out their classes with eye-catching titles, like "Desperate Housewives and Literature," and to rework their lectures on standard deviation into stand-up comedy routines.**

like "Desperate Housewives and Literature," and to rework their lectures on standard deviation into stand-up comedy routines.

The doctrine of relevance, of course, is just bureaucratic jargon for the view that students will want to learn because the novelties of the classroom will seduce them into doing so. But it takes little reflection to realize that the occasional arousal of intellectual curiosity in an English, history, or philosophy class—even should it be occasioned by a professor on par with Jerry Seinfeld—is rather less seductive than the literal seduction that awaits students every Thursday night at the local bar. This fact makes the prospects of accomplishing much in class Friday morning rather bleak.

Instead of relying on the students' existing habits and appetites, left over from four years of high school, to carry them from the caverns of secondary education into the World of Forms envisioned on the professor's syllabus, it may be helpful to implement a few disciplinary measures specifically aimed at reshaping student desires and interests.

The only compulsory measure regularly used by universities today is the low grade. Students avoid low grades to gain a lucrative career and to avoid public embarrassment. The way grades motivate is little different than the way a mugger motivates when he brandishes a revolver and demands your wallet. After you've given the mugger your money and he has gone his way, you know you did what you had to do, but you wish you hadn't had to. I once went to a dental hygienist who, while digging about in my mouth, bemoaned the fact she hadn't partied more and studied less in college. College, she thought, was about the career, yes. But it was also about the experience. No one has fond memories of the time they gave their wallet to a bandit—even if it had saved their life.

Grades are very different from the way, for instance, coaches motivate children to become excellent athletes or the way a good piano teacher molds young pianists. The key in both cases is not to rely on what the neophyte desires initially, but instead to shape the pupil's desires through habituation. After habituation, playing the piano can be enjoyable. Initially, however, playing the piano is painful. No one would continue playing long enough to learn it without external motivation. Without a sense of filial or fraternal duty, what young athlete would endure the strains of football practice?

The same goes for study. Students can get to the point where the raptures of learning blot out the anti-intellectual distractions of the college experience. But this is not a natural point to be at. It must be learned through a grueling habituation not of the intellect, but of the will—a grueling habituation that will never occur if grades remain the sole means of compelling students to study and if professors never take on the moral authority of a mentor or coach.

*Elliot Polsky is in the final year of doctoral coursework in philosophy at the Center for Thomistic Studies.*

## PARENTS' "MONUMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY"

*By Larry Purdy*

To address the overarching question, "Personal Responsibility in Education" is undeniably a broadly shared responsibility. It's not just a personal responsibility for the students who clearly have an obligation to work hard to achieve the best performance possible; perhaps more importantly, it is a monumental responsibility placed on the shoulders of parents and guardians to do their very best to create an environment outside the school that encourages their child's academic achievement.

Without encouragement from caring adults, particularly during the early years, and notwithstanding how excellent the school and its teachers may be, a child may never grasp the importance of academics. It isn't rocket science to observe that what is lost in the first three to four years can be devastating, and the longer the lack of interest in academic achievement persists, the more difficult it becomes to reverse it.

**Not to oversimplify it, but when a child comes home from school, does the parent express interest in how the school day went?**

It has been observed that the single most important factor in a school's success and, by extension, its students' success is the degree of parental involvement, which I submit is the same as parental responsibility. But it is important to define what is meant by that phrase. It is not, for example, measured by the amount of money a parent may donate, nor is it measured by the number of times a parent simply volunteers or visits a classroom to praise (or complain about) the teachers. It relates to the importance the parent places on seeing his or her child succeed in school and how that is demonstrated to the child.



Not to oversimplify it, but when a child comes home from school, does the parent express interest in how the school day went? Does the parent make the effort to inform him or herself about successes and/or difficulties the child may be experiencing? Does the parent make clear the importance of mastering basic reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons? Is assistance willingly offered? Or, as is unfortunately all-too-common, is the home environment one where a television (or laptop or iPhone) is constantly on, no discussion of academics ever occurs, and the only reading material placed in front of the child is found on cereal boxes and soup cans?

The role of a parent is also enhanced or hampered by the parent's own educational history. Parents who successfully graduated from high school (and college) and gained an appreciation for the importance of educational achievement are likely to pass that appreciation on to their children. Indeed, the example set by academically accomplished parents in and of itself sends a message to their children.

Conversely, if the parent or guardian is not a competent reader or writer, it is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine a home environment that lends itself to a child's success in school. In the same vein, it is difficult to place a heavy dose of responsibility on a child, living under those circumstances, for failing to achieve academic success. Even worse is to live in a broader cultural environment where academic success is demeaned. For better or worse, one's peers can have as large an effect as one's parents when it comes to doing well in school.

While a family's socioeconomic status is not to be ignored as an important factor, parental involvement does not depend upon the family's material wealth. One of the most stirring examples, which touches on many of the issues mentioned above, is found in the poignant family history recounted by noted neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson in his uplifting autobiography, *Gifted Hands*.

Finally, do teachers and the government have a role to play? Of course. It goes without saying that caring, competent teachers make a difference. So do competent school boards as well as local, state, and federal programs that are properly focused on educational achievement for all our students. Yet without an environment inside the home and within the broader community that places a high value on doing one's best in school, these external forces may be for naught.

Bottom line: Parents have the largest role to play and the heaviest responsibility when it comes to a child's education.

*Larry Purdy is a Minneapolis attorney.*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CHOICE AND READING BY THIRD GRADE**

*By Fred Senn*

Can we get kids at risk to work harder in school? At third grade, according to the 2019 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, 67 percent of white kids are reading at grade level compared to 33 percent of black and Hispanic kids. Two-thirds of our children of color are not able to read by the end of third grade. Despite all the handwringing about the achievement gap, those scores haven't moved in years. And how discouraging it must be for a ten-year-old to be that far behind.

Is this a poverty problem, a school problem, or a cultural problem? In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell asks why Asian kids are beating the rest of our kids in math. Why are they better at math? It's the "rice culture."

Gladwell describes how tending rice paddies is a complicated project that requires constant vigilance and hard work. To have a successful rice paddy, you must rise before dawn and work hard all day, every day. The amount of work and diligence you put into the paddy directly affects how



successful it will be.

Gladwell explains that Asian kids are actually not better at math. It's cultural persistence. He concludes with this footnote: "In a test, large groups of Japanese and American first-graders were given a very difficult puzzle. The American kids worked an average of 10 minutes. The Japanese kids worked 40 percent longer."

Most of us would agree that diligence and grit are keys to academic success. But that's not my thesis here. Have you ever met a three-year-old who was a reluctant learner? And yet, by fourth grade, too many kids are starting to shut down. What happens between age three and age 11 that moves too many kids from eager to lackadaisical?

In third grade, something frightening happens. For the first 10 years of your life, you were learning to read. After that, in fourth grade you had to read to learn. Now, if you can't read, are you going to look forward to school? How motivated are you going to be? This is a big fork in the road for kids at risk. There are frightening statistics on how their graduation rates, job prospects, and life prospects decline if they can't read by fourth grade.

Does anybody know how to fix this? In a new book, *How the Other Half Learns*, Robert Pondiscio tells the controversial story of Success Academy in New York City. It has 45 charter schools, with over 17,000 students—90 percent children of color. Three-fourths are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. New York has an English Language Arts exam. In 2016, 82 percent of Success Academy's students passed, compared to 59 percent of Asian and white students citywide. Success Academy has not lowered its standards or dumbed down its pedagogy. These schools are tough and regimented. But teachers at Success Academy campuses seem to be doing two things differently. Education writer David Whitman put it this way: "There had to be a caring connection between teacher and student for strict discipline to work."

Here's the second difference. Success Academy demands an equal degree of discipline and involvement from parents. When parents choose their child's school, they're already sending a message about their expectations, but Success Academy holds parents' feet to the fire, too.

As impressive as these results are, they are not unique. KIPP is a non-profit network of 242 college preparatory, public charter schools. Its demographics are similar to those of Success Academy: Three-quarters of their children come from single-parent homes. Fifty-five percent of KIPP third graders are reading at grade level, well ahead of the national scores for all kids.

**When parents choose their child's school, they're already sending a message about their expectations, but Success Academy holds parents' feet to the fire, too.**

These are just two examples. Clearly, it's possible to bring a little bit of the rice culture intensity to black and brown students from poor neighborhoods and bring it to scale. It's no coincidence that these are charter schools; parents get to choose.

If we want to close the achievement gap, let's dramatically raise the percentage of kids who can read in third grade. Doesn't it make sense that successful readers will be a lot more motivated to learn? And when children start kindergarten ready to learn, and can read by third grade, teacher morale goes up and special education numbers go down.

Winning strategies go beyond the classroom. This is hard. Every piece of research I've seen says single parents are at a distinct disadvantage. Discipline problems and lack of motivation overwhelmingly affect boys of color growing up without enough positive male role models. But the schools discussed above prove that academic success is still very much within reach for the children of single moms.

Yes, kids need to work hard regardless of the social and cultural constraints they inherit. But getting them to work hard is our collective problem, not theirs.

We need to do two things to motivate these kids. First, make sure that they have access to high quality early learning as early as possible so that they are ready for school. Second, create more opportunities for parents to choose the kind of schools that know how to get their children to fourth grade as readers motivated to learn. Imagine if 80 percent of all Minnesota third graders could read at grade level. It is possible, at scale.

*Fred Senn is a founding partner of Fallon, a Minneapolis-headquartered advertising agency.*

## **TAKING STUDENTS UPSTREAM IN A RIVER THAT ROARS AGAINST THEM**

*By Chong Thao*

The relationship between society and the individual should be that of two people in love, where each promises the other certain things and then follows through with such promises. While society creates institutions to groom responsible, contributing citizens, the individual hopes for opportunities, acceptance, and personal success. This process is ongoing, re-evaluated, and maintained to keep the relationship equitable, relevant, strong. The historical reality is that the relationship between society and the individual has been forged not in love but power, where society has played the paternalistic role of a bad parent, favoring some children, while neglecting and even abusing others.

Institutions are steeped in white hegemony, and schools have participated in its sanction and replication. Schools' great scholarly tradition has centered around white dominant culture—where logic, philosophy, art, rhetoric, and history favor white European traditions and values and

everything else is superstitious, irrational, other. Although the state mandates teaching American Indian history and “other diverse cultures,” such curriculum remains obscure as 95 percent of teachers in Minnesota are White. This disproportionality is part of the problem as teachers resort

**Institutions are steeped in white hegemony, and schools have participated in its sanction and replication.**

to teaching their passions, covering what they know, or following tradition—which is to teach the way they were taught. And this means absent narratives will remain that, absent from the classrooms.

In Minnesota's largest and most diverse school districts, the call for ethnic studies—by educators, communities of color, and students—to be included in the curriculum is rejected again and again. Schools and society's dispossession of their members of color is revealed in the way they tell these members' stories—that they make up the poor, the sick, the homeless, the displaced, the achievement gap, without acknowledging how these conditions came to be through racist policies that ensure such conditions in the first place.

No one takes personal responsibility for creating and implementing such policies, but students of color are supposed to take personal responsibility for when such policies succeed at keeping them down. This sort of exclusion is manifested in the academic achievement gap, where the measurement of proficiency, the standardized test, is still a tool of social class privilege and white supremacy. Schools test students of color on content that excludes them and measure their success with tools and methods that ensure their failure. The institution calls such practice accountability and demands students of color to take personal responsibility for its own failings.

A society that actively seeks out its co-creation

from all its members is one that can call for personal responsibility of them. For the institution to ask for personal responsibility of all its members, a parent must ask himself if he has given all his children the tools to do such a thing. Has every child been fed or are there certain favorites that have grown fat from eating first and getting the best cut of the meat?

As a high school teacher, I see the impact of this difference. I am not naive to the factors outside of race and culture that make oppression and suffering intersectional. But in school, year in and year out, my job is to take students of color upstream in a river that roars against them. Content curriculum, accountability tools, rules of engagement, agents of schools—from teachers to leadership—reflect white dominant society, where the merit of a student of color is not just to achieve but to overcome such hurdles. To succeed despite this and that. And often, they do both. And we praise them for being exceptional and thus the rule—and why can't every student of color be like so and so? Sure, it's tough, but this is pull-yourself-by-your-bootstraps America. Never mind that some of them do not have boots and America is defined by their very exclusion.

Students of color are called to take personal responsibility, if not for the very reason that they must, or else the consequences will be severe. I am not talking about the students who create chaos in schools for various reasons. I am talking about the students who are thrown out with the bathwater as restorative culture focuses on the shenanigans of the former. The latter are invisible as schools and society, in the nation's current xenophobia, call for a melting pot—not to affirm shared values but to absolve this country's ugly history.

One of the first lessons I teach my students is the definition of an educated person. It is not one who wields the potential to rule others, make money, or even find happiness; rather, an educated person is someone who can hold multiple vying ideologies in one hand at the same time. Students of color must see the contradiction of their relationship with their schools—that it is an institution to maintain the

status quo. The student's job must be to overcome, persevere, and maintain their cultural integrity.

Entrenched in this is the skill of code switching; in the school setting, this involves adopting the culture of the school. School culture entails the daily, systematically patterned ways that school members bring to the space for learning to take place. It involves following the rules to attain the end of being conferred a diploma. This is the extent of personal responsibility I am calling for from students of color.

For schools, I am hailing not for a perfunctory deference to the nation's supposed great awakening, expressed in feel-good restorative circles only to return to the same ole thing; rather, I am calling for real change, from parent-child to people in love. People in love do not merge into each other, where one disappears, but stand side by side in partnership. Only then can we call for personal responsibility from all.

*Chong Thao is a 22-year veteran high school English teacher who lives and works in St. Paul.*

## CREATING MODELS OF “MOTIVATING” SCHOOLS

*By Bob Wedl*

It's tempting to say, “Damn right! Do as I did. Stay in school. Work hard. Go to college. Be successful.” That does work pretty well with 70 percent of our youth. But we have too many students who are not successful. Let's look at this not only from a moral and an economic perspective but from an improvement perspective as that expands on who is personally responsible.

We can stipulate that educating our citizens is the moral thing to do. Economically, education is the primary route to a successful life as defined any way you want. Most everyone agrees on the goals of education as articulated in the “Creating the World's Best Workforce” law. But as Shakespeare

says in *The Merchant of Venice*, “If to do were only as easy as to know what we are well to do.”

Let’s also stipulate that students should try harder, parents should do better, schools should engage students, etc. Lots of “shoulds.” But let’s be clear: Our schools are doing pretty much what they are designed to do. They never were designed to meet the needs of each student. What is interesting is that efforts to change that get met with resistance.

If we want to know how to inspire parents and kids to do better why don’t we ask them? I bet parents would say things like, “I’m doing the best I can now. I’m not keeping my good kids at home, you know.” Kids would say, “I’m bored. School doesn’t make any sense.” The Center for Policy Design in St. Paul is doing a study that asks students why. In addition, I suggest three factors that we can address and if we would, how that might change how individuals personally act.

First, we can get a lot more from both teachers and students. Our schools are improving on yesterday’s model which was not designed to meet each student’s needs. Schools rely primarily on teachers teaching. A high school principal told me his school was a place where kids come to watch teachers work. They watch the first period teacher work for 50 minutes, and that continues for five more periods. Let’s treat teachers as professionals. Now they are laborers. What if we let teachers design the school model, curriculum, instruction, and so on? What if schools were like other professional organizations? In them, physicians, lawyers, architects, or whatever the professionals are who comprise the organization, not the firm administrators, make the important decisions.

At Avalon High School in St. Paul, teachers are the highest paid persons and make all the major decisions. Same at Minnesota New Country School in rural Henderson. They design the school around 21st-century concepts. Students are grouped in pods and each has an office desk with a computer, and there is meeting space in their pod to work on projects with other students.

Teachers say they work harder but smarter than in a traditional school, and they’d never go back to the report-to-the-principal model. These teachers do not get burned out, and the turnover is zero. They call the shots. District schools in Farmington, Spring Lake Park, and Lakeville are moving in this direction as well. The teachers’ union in Minneapolis wanted this, but the school board wouldn’t let them. We know the results.

**Why not grant a high school diploma when a student has attained a career certification or begins an apprenticeship or completes an associate’s degree or even a year of college (through the various post-secondary enrollment options in high school) as they have demonstrated they are career ready?**

How do we get more from students? By creating models of schools that are motivating for students, we will not be able to keep most from working hard and attending school every day. But when students are “watching teachers work” and are expected to regurgitate back information on a test nine weeks later, motivation wanes. Many high school students would excel in technical fields leading to jobs that pay north of \$40,000. What if we personalized the graduation standards instead of requiring all students to meet the same standards regardless of their aspirations and needs? A high school diploma was a terminal degree until the 1950s. Now it is almost meaningless as more is needed. Why not grant a high school diploma when a student has attained a career certification or begins an apprenticeship or completes an associate’s degree or even a year of college (through the various post-secondary enrollment options in high school) as they have demonstrated they are career ready?

Second, we hear, “There are no silver bullets.” But indeed there are. Minnesota has a diverse population, but this horrendous achievement gap is inexcusable. The evidence-based research is clear as to what works. Schools are slow to grab these silver



bullets and instead continue to do what decades of evidence shows is not successful. I support pre-K programs but again the evidence-based models are rarely used for literacy. And Minnesota has no statewide data to show the impact of the hundreds of millions spent on pre-K. The University of Chicago NORC Center did an analysis of the impact of the Minnesota Reading Corps pre-K program and found the youngsters in it performed statistically significantly better than those in the matched sample. Yet no one is knocking down the door of the Reading Corps.

Third, the legislature is reticent to permit schools to research new models. The legislature needs to expand the Innovation Research Zone law to permit significant redesign.

*Robert J. Wedl was Minnesota commissioner of education in the administration of Gov. Arne Carlson and deputy commissioner in the administration of Gov. Rudy Perpich.*

## **A PLACE WHERE DISCIPLINED INQUIRY CAN FLOURISH**

*By David Weerts*

As the nation becomes more diverse, there has been a significant shift in how college leaders think about meeting the needs of today's college students. But first, a bit of context.

I am a faculty member in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities where I teach in the higher education administration track. My colleagues and I train future leaders of colleges and universities. Many scholars in our field explore questions related to college student success. Most of these scholars are devoted to shifting educational practice from a "deficit view" of the student to an "assets-building" view.

The deficit view suggests that students come into the university with intellectual deficiencies and

that the role of the university is to provide them with knowledge, skills, and competencies that correct these deficiencies. From this perspective, the responsibility of students is to buckle down, integrate into the learning community, and get up to speed with the rigors of academic life. Many of my colleagues critique the deficit view as a dog-whistle signaling who belongs in college and who doesn't. As gaps in college preparedness across race, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups persist, these discussions often take on racial overtones.

In contrast, the assets-building view is embedded in the notion that today's college students come from increasingly diverse backgrounds and that the modern university must transform itself to accommodate for diverse learner abilities, experiences, and cultural/social identities. From this standpoint, students are not coming in as deficient but rather having unique assets to bring to a learning community. Insights from the assets-building view has provided important contributions to understanding how traditionally white universities can become more inclusive and attuned to the needs of today's students.

A downside of this shift is that it has ushered in a "throw the baby out with the bathwater" mindset that now leaves us with thorny questions about norms of academic performance. Among them: By what yardstick do we measure academic performance when the terms of performance are increasingly linked to race, class, and other student identities? Professors trained in traditional ways are left in a difficult spot. For example, we are entering an era where providing critical feedback on a paper may be interpreted as a slight (now called microaggression) and failing to honor the student's abilities, background, and ways of knowing.

Through the assets-building perspective, students' lived experience is preeminent. What this has meant practically is that in some cases, students don't believe that their ideas need be tested against well-established intellectual traditions. (In response to one of my course assignments, a student asked to write a personal narrative rather than analyzing the course material as required.)

In addressing this dilemma, my approach has been to invoke some historical perspective and build trusting relationships with students so that they know that I have their best interests in mind in preparing them for a professional career. I discuss how fields of knowledge have developed over generations and that, while not perfect and culturally laden, they provide us with the framework

**By what yardstick do we measure academic performance when the terms of performance are increasingly linked to race, class, and other student identities?**

by which we assess performance and create new knowledge. Wherever possible, I aim to invoke some humility and vulnerability in talking about my own growth process and “deficits” as an academic and an imperfect human.

We are in a challenging new era of academia. Whatever our position on this issue, our new reality requires us to act charitably and in ways that demonstrate care and support for our students and also in a manner that builds faith in the academy as a place where disciplined inquiry can flourish.

*David Weerts is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota.*

## **HARD WORK IS EXPECTED REGARDLESS**

*By Catrin Wigfall*

“I didn’t get my homework done last night,” whispered a former fifth grade student of mine as I walked around collecting the previous day’s assignments. With a downcast face and hands solemnly folded on the desk, the student anticipated my next question and continued, “I was playing with my brother and then my mom made me eat dinner and take a bath and go to bed.”

After getting the rest of the class started on the first lesson of the day, I pulled the student aside to continue the conversation. The school year had just started a couple of weeks earlier, but the student was well aware the provided excuse would not pass muster.

I told the student I understood schedules get busy, but prioritizing school and homework were important for the student’s success inside and outside the classroom setting. The conversation concluded with the student noting which classroom virtue was not demonstrated—personal responsibility—and together we identified what action steps would help the right choice to be made next time. The student also understood there would be logical consequences for not completing the assignments.

What I took away from the above exchange was my former student’s eagerness to do better. He may not be successful all the time, but we worked together to identify what was in his control that he could act upon to help him be his very best.

And his parents were also part of this learning process. Both were well aware the student chose playtime over homework, and they warned the student of the consequences that would ensue. Behavioral skills, just like academic skills, must be taught, and the parents’ involvement in helping their child learn responsibility was of the utmost importance.

The demise of personal responsibility occurs when blame is placed on family, peers, economic circumstances, or society and not on oneself. My former student is not a bad person for failing to meet expected standards. That said, young people need to be reminded, and ultimately learn, that hard work is expected regardless. Other people and personal circumstances are not responsible for the choices that one makes.

Can exercising personal responsibility be challenging? Most definitely. Yet, when students grasp the importance of studying hard and learn-

ing as much as they can, even if it pushes them to their limits, they will be set up for a successful future.

As a teacher, I worked to connect with my students and be empathetic where I could while also not assume I fully understood their experiences. I recognized the family structure and home dynamic of many of my students contributed to their struggle to develop responsibility, but nevertheless, I best showed I cared and loved them by not lowering standards or expectations. To teach responsibility appropriately, teachers and parents must be cautious that they don't do too much for students or demand too little from them. Otherwise, any expectation of a partnership with the student to help him or her be more responsible diminishes.

**We know not all students have strong structural support at home, but to set them up for true future success, that cannot be used as an excuse for a lack of responsible behavior.**

If we are intent on solving education disparities and the complexities of the achievement gap, student personal responsibility must be part of the conversation. We know not all students have strong structural support at home, but to set them up for true future success, that cannot be used as an excuse for a lack of responsible behavior. Otherwise, we do them a disservice and undermine their ability to improve. Through accountability and high standards and expectations, students can absolutely be expected to focus on factors within their control that lead to responsible choices and positive outcomes.

*Catrin Wigfall is an American Experiment policy fellow. As a Teach for America corps member, she served as a fifth-grade general education teacher and a sixth-grade Latin teacher at a Title I charter school in Phoenix, AZ.*

## LEARNING FROM HOPE

*By J. D. Wright*

As tuition costs for traditional four-year college degrees in the United States steadily climb into the stratosphere, a consensus is growing that too many students are leaving college without their desired jobs or careers and are saddled with massive debt. Students entering universities are increasingly inadequately prepared, necessitating massive remedial efforts in mathematics and tutoring on how to study. Relatively few students entering college have fluency in a foreign language, mastery of the classics, or calculus, which was relatively standard not long ago.

What happened?

There can be no argument that entrance requirements at universities have been drastically lowered. Some colleges and universities have no entrance requirements: Everybody who can afford the cost is admitted. Minimum thresholds for Scholastic Aptitude Tests and grade point averages are a thing of the past for many universities, as are required essays to be evaluated for entering freshmen. Where universities once evaluated prospective students not only on academic criteria but also extra-curricular activity, such standards now are reserved for very few such institutions, save perhaps the military academies.

However, lowered entrance credentials do not fully account for the increasing failure of a college education. Secondary schools have in many cases shifted their emphasis away from academics and toward social engineering. Programs such as Common Core and social equity experiments teach students about white privilege and Christian privilege, and the need for reparations and that America was built on the backs of black slaves.

Latin is no longer taught, the great books are mostly ignored, and in mathematics creativity is stressed instead of correct results. Elementary students are invited to choose from a dizzying array

of genders, are taught about sex from age 10 and earlier and are taught to focus upon skin color instead of ignoring it.

School effectiveness is measured by graduation rates rather than the academic prowess of graduates. Determining that a student lacks the academic performance to pass to the next grade is thought to be demeaning and perhaps even dangerous to the student, as the students' self-esteem is valued above all. Academic performance gaps between white and Asian students and other students of color (again, the emphasis on skin color) give schools hesitancy to fail minority students regardless of their performance on pain of lawsuit or teacher termination.

**School teachers and administrations have watched as their students' performance declines while they pedal the educational bicycle as fast as they can trying to meet administrative and managerial requirements.**

Teachers rightly point out that today's students come to the classroom less prepared and saddled with more burdens than ever before. A much larger number of students than ever before come from single-parent households. Many have a parent working multiple jobs. More things compete for students' attention (and their dollars) as young people now comprise an actual market and carry their own credit cards. Attention spans are down. Interruptions to the thinking and learning process are drastically up as schools give up on trying to prevent smart phones from entering the classroom. Students have high expectations and a sense of entitlement.

Assessment of student performance is hampered by personalized education plans which prevent comparison among students. State standardized tests are given, but the results are frequently marginalized or ignored as pass rates for students

meeting state standards hover around 60 percent while graduation rates exceed 90 percent. Meanwhile, students have a dizzying array of colleges and universities to choose from, including career and technical colleges, fully online universities, hybrid online/brick-and-mortar colleges, and parochial universities where the "parochial" is fully optional.

Who is responsible for this educational crisis?

We all are: parents, students, teachers, administration, and all of us who vote or do not. School boards have been allowed to run amok with social agendas without accountability for academic performance. Parents have trusted schools (and those who choose the curricula) without providing parental supervision. School teachers and administrations have watched as their students' performance declines while they pedal the educational bicycle as fast as they can trying to meet administrative and managerial requirements.

What is to be done?

Parents are choosing parochial or private schools, or if they do not have the funds, some are sacrificing their own careers to home school. Some of these solutions are good ones; however, the public schools continue to follow a downwards spiral of academic performance.

We should all note the exceptions to the rule. One shining example in the Twin Cities is Hope Academy. Located in one of the poorest areas in the Twin Cities, Hope Academy achieves, at much lower costs, substantially higher performance in math and reading than nearby public schools. Work ethic is taught early (Hope is a "no excuses" school), the term is 10 months long, and both students and parents are accountable. Latin and Spanish are both mastered, the great books are read, and physics and calculus are taught.

While Hope is a Christian school designed around biblical principles, its academic perfor-



mance and incredibly high graduation rates for all students (regardless of color) cannot be ignored. Perhaps the public schools could learn something from Hope.

*J. D. Wright is a university professor and former college dean.*

## THE INESCAPABLE NEED FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ASSISTANCE

*By Shawn Yates*

I chose to write for this symposium based on the question, “To what extent should students be expected to work hard regardless of social and cultural constraints?” I have found that the term “personal responsibility” is one that many privileged members of society coopt to point fingers of blame in an attempt to remove themselves from their own culpability and moral accountability. In fact, in so doing they are avoiding their own personal responsibility, especially insofar as heeding the call to love others.

As a society, we have a tendency to marginalize people of lower income brackets and different racial backgrounds, treating individuals as though everyone should be able to meet the same standards regardless of the circumstances in which they are raised. It seems to be the easy answer to several societal ills where people of a privileged class deem that others should afford the same priorities as they do. At times, that is in relation to education, other times to health care, and still others to various aspects of life that many take for granted.

Basic health care needs and common diseases such as diabetes or poor vision are often considered simple and obvious problems to which solutions are plentiful. For children of poverty, however, that may not be the case. Often, families in abject poverty expend finite resources in attempts to provide for the next meal or heat in the winter. We all have

limited capacity and energy. When the majority of those resources are being spent on simple survival, it leaves little to complete other tasks for which the more privileged provide with nary a consideration.

In education, we are not immune to this graceless behavior. Through implicit bias, children are frequently misdiagnosed as lazy or unmotivated when in reality the witnessed behaviors may be tied to factors inherent with poverty or racial disparity. I, unfortunately, am aware of situations in which indigenous students and children subjected to abject poverty have been marginalized when they were lacking basic human needs such as a consistent home or proper nutrition. When we take the time to understand the living situations to which some of our students are exposed, we can better provide the supports afforded to others, allowing each child to focus properly on their academics and behaviors and thus exhibit more socially acceptable personal responsibility.

**When the majority of those resources are being spent on simple survival, it leaves little to complete other tasks for which the more privileged provide with nary a consideration.**

Frustration often comes from people who expect responsibility to be shown without recognizing the necessity and willingness to teach it. In order to expect students to gain personal responsibility, we have a duty first to exhibit our own relational responsibility. In other words, we must know our students and families. When we understand the needs being faced, we can better prepare and come alongside the individual. We are not lowering our expectations of performance; we are maximizing our results by being intentional in our approach.

Knowing the prevalence of these feelings in society does not mean that personal responsibility does not exist. It simply means that people with

less advantageous support systems require a different level of assistance than those who have it already. Providing a child with support in school by offering meals or warm clothes will provide for immediate physical needs, but poverty robs children of other supports that those who have not experienced it struggle to grasp. That lack of understanding leads people to accuse the educational system unfairly of treating young people as fragile or lackadaisical.

Diversity of race and culture can bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to our schools and communities. Challenges arise however when we attempt to treat everyone in the exact same way. The reality is, we are all unique and have different needs. Fair should become less a matter of receiving the exact same thing as the person next to you and more of an outgrowth of what each individual requires to be successful. Before we encourage others to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, we should see what kind of footwear they have, if any.

*Shawn Yates serves as superintendent of a public school district in Minnesota.*

## **EDUCATING CHILDREN IS A FIDUCIARY UNDERTAKING**

*By Stephen B. Young*

Education is an intentional, planned, organized social enterprise. It builds the social and human capitals necessary for the survival and the well-being of human life. It is not an individual enterprise, some form of random walk through a psychological briar patch of fear, desire, and illusion. It is necessarily dyadic, being the reciprocal interpersonal exchange relationship of the teacher and the student. The student has a role to play as does the teacher.

The educational enterprise collapses in circumstances of license, unfettered willfulness, abuse of freedom, and any other overlooking of the other.

Narcissism in the student or the teacher undermines the quality of the educational experience. Thus, the moral sense in both student and teacher is a foundation for successful education.

Character, in other words, is necessary for a student to achieve intellectually and in personal maturity. Character in the teacher is necessary for earning respect from the student and to constrain the student's wayward tendencies with caring discipline.

The notion that education can be a completely natural—unstructured, unguided—process, a gift of the gods, a kind of precious bud in the student's mind which will bloom on its own without exogenous nourishment, is hogwash.

Both activation of the moral sense (using the brain's pre-frontal cortex lobes) and education begin with the learning of language—a teacher-student dyadic interaction beginning at birth. The natural law of *homo sapiens* is that, barring a birth defect, all persons have an equal capacity to become educated. Each person comes equipped with the mental machinery first generating and then executing the moral sense. The degree of educational achievement and its intellectual form will vary naturally from person to person depending on a number of factors, some internal to the person and others resulting from circumstance.

Educating children is a fiduciary undertaking, a trusteeship of the powers and abilities vested in teachers, resulting in a moral obligation on the part of teachers to assist the student in becoming successful as a responsible adult with knowledge and skills appropriate to a worthy person who is wise and just.

Thus, in education expectations for achievement are set by the fiduciary—that is, the teacher—and not by the student. A good fiduciary, however, always studies and considers the circumstances of the student, the talents and skills brought to the learning process, and the probable life outcomes contingent on successful learning and adjusts the

learning process to optimize the future well-being of the student.

Teaching is therefore something of an entrepreneurial undertaking—investing current intangible social and human capital in a risky work—the student growing into an adult, the results of which will only become known in future years.

Because education is dyadic, neither the teacher nor the student alone can achieve success in the process. A teacher given lazy, disengaged, uncooperative students will fail to educate them. A willing and eager student placed in the care of a stupid, mean, condescending, uncaring teacher will not grow properly in mind and heart.

Excellent outcomes in education cannot be imposed on students by the social structures in which they are placed as learners. They must be earned by them. Thus, the use of the Latin word *educere*—to “lead out that which is within.” A large part of successful education is to have what the student brings to the learning relationship “drawn out” and put to work in the process of becoming a more learned person.

Successful education requires that both halves of the dyad perform their respective roles to expectations.

Thus, in the United States today, we can explain different educational outcomes for different students both by failure and success on the part of teachers and by the good and bad habits brought to the process by the students.

We know enough about development of the moral sense (or the executive function) to understand that various specific conditions impede students from performing up to expectation in their roles as learners. Some stresses imposed on students from living in conditions of poverty interfere with sound development of the moral sense. But not in all students. Many living in poverty are nonetheless raised to be good and avid learners. Similarly, with ascriptive racial status. Under conditions of social and cultural racism, some

students will buckle under and feel incapable of learning in a school setting. And yet other individuals born with the same ascriptive racial status perform very well in school.

**The notion that education can be a completely natural—unstructured, unguided—process, a gift of the gods, a kind of precious bud in the student’s mind which will bloom on its own without exogenous nourishment, is hogwash.**

It would therefore seem that an important variable in a student’s capacity for learning, regardless of ascriptive racial status, is the quality of family life and home experiences with more or less development of the moral sense or personal executive function. In this sense, parents and other members of a family are very important teachers. They owe their students and society at large personal best efforts in that fiduciary office. The educational office of parent as teacher should not be ignored or subcontracted to the uncaring or the incapable, or any sort of riffraff, harmful toys, social media, or other readily available but narcissistic diversions.

In the formula of the Search Institute, it is up to responsible adults to provide children with developmental assets.

The moral sense or use of the executive function can be specified as the student taking personal responsibility in the learning process. Inculcate that virtue in students, and educational achievement among all students will soar as never before in recent decades. ●

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