

NURTURING THE LIFE OF THE MIND

By Kathleen Vail (American School board journal, Jan 2001)

You don't need to look far for evidence that we Americans don't place a very high value on intellect. Our heroes are athletes, entertainers, and entrepreneurs, not scholars. But our schools, with their high academic standards, high-stakes tests, and performance bonuses for improved achievement scores -- surely our schools are bastions of intellectualism?

Not necessarily.

Your parents and community, even your teachers and administrators, perhaps even you, might unwittingly be holding back your schools from cultivating intellect in your students and exposing them to the joys of the life of the mind.

Why? Because as a nation, we just don't trust brainy people. The stereotype of the muddle-headed professor -- the one who can recite passages of Dante's *Inferno* in the original Italian but doesn't realize his pants are on backwards -- is alive and well. We'd rather our children were sociable than scholarly. The results of a 1995 Public Agenda survey clearly point out our distrust of scholars and academics. Seven out of 10 Americans agreed that "people who are highly educated often turn out to be book smart but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folk." Seven out of 10 respondents said they would be very or somewhat concerned if their child earned excellent grades but had only a few close friends and seldom participated in social activities. In focus groups, a New Jersey parent said, "If you focus on the brain, it becomes too tedious." A Cincinnati woman avowed, "If everyone were a genius, it would be a dull world."

Schools are places where we send our children to get a practical education -- not to pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake. Symptoms of pervasive anti-intellectualism in our schools aren't difficult to find:

- A former school board member in Armonk, N.Y., pulled her son and daughter out of the public schools and placed them in a private school. She'd become increasingly frustrated trying to get more challenging classes for her son. Some staff members resisted creating a gifted program because the other students "would feel bad about not being selected," she said.
- A Columbiana, Ala., school board member asked administrators to investigate middle school English teacher Pam Cooper, who was teaching Shakespeare and Chaucer to eighth-graders. The board member worried that students shouldn't be reading books they'd later encounter in high school literature classes, books that seemed to be beyond their ability level.
- School boards around the country are questioning the merit of homework. The Piscataway, N.J., school board, for example, recently limited the amount of homework teachers could assign, discouraged weekend and holiday assignments, and prohibited teachers from grading work done at home. Parents complained that homework was interfering with their children's extracurricular activities.

"Schools have always been in a society where practical is more important than intellectual," says education historian and writer Diane Ravitch. "Schools could be a counterbalance." Ravitch's latest book, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, traces what she considers the roots of anti-intellectualism in our schools. Schools, she concludes, are anything but a counterbalance to American's distaste for intellectual pursuits.

But they could and should be. When we encourage our children to reject the life of the mind, we leave them vulnerable to exploitation and control. Without the ability to think critically, to defend their ideas and understand the ideas of others, they cannot fully participate in our democracy. If we continue along this path, says writer Earl Shorris, our nation will suffer. "We will become a second-rate country," he says. "We will have a less civil society."

An American tradition

"Intellect is resented as a form of power or privilege," wrote historian and professor Richard Hofstadter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, a Pulitzer-Prize winning book tracing the roots of anti-intellectualism in U.S. politics, religion, and education. Published in 1963, it is considered a watershed book on the subject and rings as true today as it did 30 years ago.

Animosity toward intellectuals is in our country's DNA. From the beginning of our nation's history, according to Hofstadter, our democratic and populist urges have driven us to reject anything that smacks of elitism. Practicality, common sense, and native intelligence have been considered more noble qualities than anything you could learn from a book. Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalist philosophers of the 19th century thought schooling and rigorous book learning put unnatural restraints on children. Emerson wrote in his journal: "We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years and come out at last with a bellyful of words and do not know a thing."

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* exemplified American anti-intellectualism. The novel's hero avoids being civilized -- going to school and learning to read -- so he can preserve his innate goodness.

Intellect, according to Hofstadter, is different from native intelligence, a quality we grudgingly admire. Intellect is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of the mind. Intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, and adjust, while intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, and imagines.

School remains a place where intellect is mistrusted. As Hofstadter put it, our country's educational system is in the grips of people who "joyfully and militantly proclaim their hostility to intellect and their eagerness to identify with children who show the least intellectual promise."

Anti-intellectualism is part of our history and our culture, but it doesn't have to define our schools. Many ideas exist on how to make school a place where the life of the mind is valued as much as high test scores or athletic prowess or social status. Some of those ideas contradict each other, and some of the people who espouse them have distinct political agendas or leanings. But true intellect is nonpartisan. The best way to make sure it can flower in your schools is to start by taking a critical look at your curriculum, your teachers, and your school culture.

What are you teaching?

The idea that children must be entertained and feel good while they learn has been embraced by many well-meaning educators. In many classrooms, as a result, students are watching movies, working on multimedia presentations, surfing the Internet, putting on plays, and dissecting

popular song lyrics. The idea is to motivate students, but the emphasis on enjoyment as a facile substitute for engagement creates a culture in which students are not likely to challenge themselves or stretch their abilities. After all, if students are not shown the intrinsic rewards that come from working hard to understand a concept, they won't do it on their own. The probable result? A life spent shying away from books, poetry, art, music, public policy discussions -- anything that takes an effort to understand or appreciate and has no immediate or obvious payoff.

Project-based learning always has the potential to be based on fun rather than content, says former teacher and administrator Elaine McEwan, who wrote *Angry Parents, Failing Schools: What's Wrong with Public Schools and What You Can Do About It*. She uses the example of a class of academically struggling elementary school students in Arizona that spent 37 hours -- more than a school week -- building a paper-mache dinosaur. The local newspaper even ran a photo of the students and their handiwork. "Those kids couldn't read well, and they spent all that time messing with chicken wire and wheat paste," says McEwan.

The trend toward teaching skills rather than content has become especially popular with the advent of the Internet. Because information is changing so quickly, the argument goes, it makes more sense to teach students how to find information than to impart it to them. But if students are deprived of content and context, their forays into the Internet might not go beyond looking up the Backstreet Boys web site.

One of the most prominent proponents of imparting knowledge to children along with the skills to probe more deeply is E. D. Hirsch, the founder of the Core Knowledge curriculum approach and author of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. The University of Virginia English professor once gave a reading comprehension test to a community college class in Richmond, Va. The students were tested on a passage comparing Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant. Hirsch was astounded to discover that most of the students, living in an area rich with Civil War history, had no idea who either man was. This experience gave Hirsch the idea for compiling his dictionary of cultural literacy -- a basic body of knowledge that educated people should have at their command to be successful in school and in life.

The idea of a core body of knowledge appeals to educators such as McEwan, who worry that many teachers value process over content. Project-based learning is popular with parents, she says, because they want their children to have fun.

The quality of content concerns Santa Monica, Calif., English teacher Carol Jago, who directs the California Reading and Literature Project at the University of California Los Angeles. Jago resists assigning popular novels in her English classes, believing that students at all grade levels should read the classics.

"In the interests of being more inclusive, we've backed away from making demands on students," says Jago. "We should expand and challenge them." Teachers should help students enter into intelligent discourse about what is enduring about a particular piece of literature, she says, but it's hard for teachers to provide the necessary connections for their students and help them develop critical thinking skills. In some classrooms, Jago says, the teachers have a pact with their students: "I won't work too hard; you won't work too hard."

Jago worries that the well-publicized trend toward school boards limiting homework could have repercussions in districts all over the country. If English teachers can't assign homework, she asks, how will they teach novels to their students? The fastest way to create two classes of

students is to do away with homework, she says. The Advanced Placement kids will do the reading anyway. The kids who need the extra help the most will fall by the wayside.

Diane Ravitch points to the no-homework trend as a symptom of anti-intellectualism in the schools. "Homework is more time for students to read and write," she says. Cutting back on homework to give students more time to socialize hardly encourages them to take their schoolwork more seriously.

What are your teachers reading?

"All too often ... in the history of the United States, the school teacher has been in no position to serve as a model to the intellectual life," Hofstadter wrote. "Too often he has not only no claims to an intellectual life of his own, but not even an adequate workmanlike competence in the skills he is supposed to impart."

Harsh words, perhaps, but Hofstadter's idea makes sense: If teachers -- on the front line of education -- don't have an active intellectual life, they're not likely to communicate a love of learning and critical thinking to their students.

In his 1995 book, *Out of Our Minds: Anti-Intellectualism and Talent Development in American Schools*, Craig Howley cites several studies about the education and habits of public school teachers. According to one study, prospective teachers take fewer liberal arts courses than their counterparts in other arts and science majors -- and fewer upper-division courses in any subject except pedagogy. It appears, Howley writes, that prospective teachers do not often make a special effort during their college years to pursue advanced study in fields other than pedagogy.

Frequent reading of literature in academic fields is the mark of the scholar, Howley says, so it's logical to look at teachers' reading habits. Readers tend to be more reflective and more critical than nonreaders, argues Howley, who found that studies of teachers' reading showed two patterns: One is that teachers don't read very much -- on average, just 3.2 books a year. (In fact, 11 percent of those surveyed said they had not read a single book during the current year.) The second pattern is that when teachers do read, they prefer popular books rather than scholarly or professional literature. Of those who were reading about education, most were reading books intended for the general public.

It's true that U.S. teachers have traditionally been poorly paid and not well respected, which means that the best and the brightest are often not attracted to teaching. But until teachers can be role models and exhibit their own love of learning and academics, the children won't get it.

"Create a culture among the adults, a community of adults who are learners, who are excited about ideas in the other disciplines," says Deborah Meier, educator and author of *The Power of Their Ideas*. "The school must represent the culture it wants to encourage. If we want kids to feel that an intellectual life belongs to them, it must belong to the teacher, too."

How do you treat your smart kids?

"Far from conceiving the mediocre, reluctant, or incapable student as an obstacle or special problem in a school system devoted to educating the interested, the capable, and the gifted," wrote Hofstadter, "American education entered upon a crusade to exalt the academically uninterested or ungifted child into a kind of cult-hero."

If schools were strongholds of intellect, then the most academically able students would be the stars. But take a look at any web site aimed at parents of gifted children, and you'll see they say gifted students have almost as much trouble in school as students who don't do well. Children with advanced intellectual ability often are not given the tools they need to succeed. Ridiculed by classmates, resented by teachers, unchallenged by the standard curriculum, they're often ostracized, unhappy, or just plain bored.

Carolyn Kottmeyer, a Pennsylvania mother of two gifted daughters, recounts how a resentful fifth-grade math teacher taunted the older daughter, who received individual instruction from another math teacher. More than once, the regular math teacher walked past the library where the girl was studying. Once she stopped and asked her, "What's a Box-and-Whiskers Plot?" When the girl didn't know, the teacher turned to the class of students standing in the hallway and said, "And you think you're such a genius in math."

Such stories are shockingly common. One parent on Kottmeyer's web site says a teacher told her it was good for her sixth-grade son to be bored because "it prepares him for real life." These parents have tales of teachers who say excessive reading will hurt their child's eyesight; administrators who don't want to allow a boy to skip a grade because others will be getting their driver's licenses before him; principals who don't want to advance students because other parents will ask for the same privilege. Parents tell of teachers and principals who recommend Ritalin for children who are acting up in class because they are bored, or who deny gifted kids entrance to advanced classes because they say the students have behavior problems brought on by boredom.

Smart kids question teachers and are often nonconformists. They are taunted by their peers for being too smart or knowing too much. Some children, in desperation to fit in, hide their academic gifts. "Parents see kids who are excited about going to school, then slowly getting turned off," says Peter Rosenstein, executive director of the National Association for Gifted Children, in Washington, D.C. "Parents find out that nothing the teacher taught that day was new to the child."

Lynne Bernstein, the New York school board member who took her children out of the public school, says her son had a teacher who told him to stop raising his hand and let other children answer some questions. "You get ridiculed, you stop talking," says Bernstein.

The academic reputation of the affluent Armonk school district was the reason Bernstein and her family moved to the community. Instead, she found that a culture of noncompetition was preventing the teachers and staff from pushing kids to do more. "My kids are bright students, and they weren't being challenged," she says.

After winning election to the school board three years ago, Bernstein started a committee to look at what the district was offering gifted students. There was a great deal of resistance even to studying the issue, she says -- let alone establishing a program for more advanced students.

But small changes are coming to the district now, including offering additional honors classes at the high school level. Parents are growing nervous because their children aren't being accepted into top colleges, says Bernstein. These parents are pressuring the district to change.

"Learning comes with hard work. It's a struggle," says Bernstein. "We aren't pushing these kids enough, on the bottom, top, and middle."

When the smartest students aren't rewarded and sometimes even feel punished for being academically gifted, other students in a school are hardly likely to see any rewards in doing well, either.

"Schools must create a culture where learning is valued and people get excited about information," says former teacher McEwan. "You don't have to be embarrassed to use big words. We have to make learning cool."

But is it practical?

The purpose of public schools has never been to create thinking, analyzing, intellectual citizens, charges John Taylor Gatto, a 30-year New York City public school teacher and New York State Teacher of the Year in 1991. And that's why they're not doing it now. Today's schools are products of 19th-century industrialists, whose purpose was to prepare people to be good employees -- docile, productive, and addicted consumers. And if that's what the public wants, says Gatto, using the Socratic method to teach children to critique great works and question the way things are is a hazard to society.

"Intellect requires a critical mind, not a retentive mind," says Gatto. "Schools can't tolerate questioning."

Gatto is an outspoken critic of the public schools and an advocate of home schooling. He argues that our schools are modeled after factories where repetition and conformity are stressed over thought and expression. "The bell schedule is insane," says Gatto. "It's a rat-training device to make nothing mean very much." When you are interrupted over and over again, what you are doing loses importance, he says. "It creates apathy."

In fact, Gatto and others contend, most of what we consider to be education is actually training. The children at poorer schools receive vocational training. The children in middle-class and affluent schools receive training to become what Howley calls "intelligent careerists." In this role, he says, they are capable of responding efficiently and pragmatically to work-related problems but unable, or at least disinclined, to examine the broad social, economic, and political context in which the problems are set.

The emphasis on training over education clearly stems from Americans' love of practicality. It's easy to convince parents that their children need certain courses so they can get high-paying jobs when they graduate. But when we believe that the only reason to get an education is to make money, says Howley, "we create a society that thinks about jobs and profit making as universals."

Worse, he says, the idea that education is solely a means to earn money has made us into narcissists whose only goal in life is to make more money -- not to be responsible to each other or our community.

A case for the humanities

Propose a rigorous course of study in the humanities and liberal arts, and you'll hear protests: It's traditional. It's elitist. It's full of dead white European males. It's not inclusive. It's not relevant. It's not practical. And besides, it's too hard for our students.

Perhaps the best way to rid schools of anti-intellectualism is to reintroduce liberal arts: literature, history, poetry, philosophy, art. Through these subjects, students can learn mankind's best ideas, and they can begin constructing their own life of the mind.

When New York writer Earl Shorris started research for a book on the poor in the United States, he ended up establishing a program that brings the humanities to the inner-city poor. Students are chosen on the basis of their income, their ability to read, and their desire. Some are homeless, some never finished high school, some are in prison, some struggle with drug addiction, but they are taught by professors from elite universities.

"You've been cheated," Shorris tells his students. "Rich people learn the humanities; you didn't. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. ... Will the humanities make you rich? Yes, absolutely. But not in terms of money. In terms of life."

Shorris sees evidence that the humanities can improve the quality of our lives. In his book, *Riches for the Poor*, he recounts a conversation with one of his students. The man called Shorris to tell him about a problem with a colleague who was making him so angry that he wanted to hit her. He restrained himself, and saved his job, he said, by asking himself, "What would Socrates do?"

After five years, with the support of private foundations and government grants, Shorris' Clemente Course in the Humanities is being taught at about two dozen sites in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. And he is working on a program that would bring the course to public school teachers who would, in turn, pass their knowledge on to their students.

Teaching the humanities is ultimately more practical than training students to perform specific jobs, says Shorris: "If you give human beings the best that human beings have produced, they are changed."

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Image by Elise Rugolo-Crowe.