

# Jefferson on Public Education: Defying Conventional Wisdom

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"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Thomas Jefferson

The Fourth of July is fireworks, festivities and images of a gathering of remarkable men determined "to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."

For me the Fourth of July is those things and a question: What sort of education produced these men? What schools might produce their like again? There are clues. The author of the Declaration of Independence had much to say about educating the very young.

Thomas Jefferson lobbied the Virginia General Assembly to implement a system of publicly-funded schools. He failed. It would be sixty years before Horace Mann traveled the state of Massachusetts on horseback advocating a system of "common schools" and decades more before most states would follow Massachusetts' lead.

Jefferson's vision for public education is, nonetheless, illuminating and provocative. The main source is his Notes on the State of Virginia, first published in 1785. Here are some of the key features of his plan — in the original spelling, where quoted:

1) Attendance is voluntary. "It is better to tolerate that rare instance of a parent's refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings by a forcible transportation and education of the infant against the will of his father." (1)

2) Every child is entitled to three years of instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

3) The reading for the primary school years is mainly history. "The first stage of this education . . . wherein the great mass of the people will receive their instruction, the principal foundations of future order will be laid here. Instead therefore of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of the children, at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history."

And later in the text, Jefferson writes that "of all the views of this law, none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people the safe, as they are the ultimate, guardians of their

own liberty. For this purpose the reading in the first stage, where they will receive their whole education, is proposed, as has been said, to be chiefly historical. History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views."

4) The "best genius in the school of those whose parents are too poor to give them further education" is entitled to a fourth and fifth year at a "grammar school."

5) Students at grammar schools study "Greek, Latin, geography, and the higher branches of numerical arithmetic."

6) After a trial period of one or two years, the best student at each grammar school is selected for six years of further instruction. "By this means . . . the best geniusses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at the public expense, so far as the grammar schools go."

7) After the sixth year, the best half of these go to college. "At the end of six years instruction, one half are to be discontinued (from among whom the grammar schools will probably be supplied with future masters); and the other half, who are to be chosen for the superiority of their parts and disposition, are to be sent and continued three years in the study of such sciences as they shall chuse, at William and Mary college . . ."q

Jefferson's plan defies today's conventional wisdom in every respect. But is conventional wisdom superior? Let's look at differences:

Schooling, according to Jefferson, should be voluntary rather than compulsory. Modern education is based on coercion: coerced attendance, coerced school assignments, coerced acceptance of students by schools and by teachers. Would less coercion produce happier results?

Jefferson felt that three years of formal schooling would be enough to teach "the great mass of the people" how to read, write, and do arithmetic and enough history to "qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men . . . to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views."

We moderns think children should go to school for a time that amounts, in Jeffersonian terms, to forever. Do we prolong dependence and immaturity to no great gain in learning?

Jefferson put great stock in the study of history during those first three years of school. The closest elementary-level incarnation today of the view that "their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history" is E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s Core Knowledge curriculum. The theoretical bases are different. Professor Hirsch would give children the background information they will later need to read at advanced levels. Jefferson believed reading history would inform children's judgment.

Neither viewpoint has a presence in modern primary education. Prevailing wisdom is embodied in the "expanding horizons" social studies curriculum: "Me" (kindergarten), "My Family, My School" (1st grade), "My Neighborhood" (2nd grade), "My Community" (3rd grade), and "My State" (4th grade).

Do we underestimate children? Do we underestimate the instructive power of history?

Jefferson believed in selection by merit from an early age: "By that part of our plan which prescribes the selection of youths of genius from the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought and cultivated."

Could a dose of selection strengthen education, particularly urban education? "Many communities of color" say urban sociologist Pedro A. Noguera and historian Robert Cohen "are increasingly focusing on how to make our racially separate schools more equal. That focus has yielded a small number of successful selective public schools that cater primarily to black and Latino students." (2)

Jefferson's embrace of selectivity makes especial sense in light of his curricular recommendations for the fourth and fifth years of school, and beyond. Grammar school years should be devoted to the study of Greek and Latin. Before dismissing that idea as elitist folly, consider this remark about our Founding Fathers made by the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough: "They were steeped in, soaked in, marinated in, the classics: Greek and Roman history, Greek and Roman ideas, Greek and Roman ideals. It was their model, their example. And they saw themselves very much like the Greeks and the Romans, as actors on a great stage in one of the great historic dramas of all time." (Mr. McCullough gave voice to these thoughts in a 2002 speech at DePauw University.)

Jefferson knew that a facility for languages is a special talent of the young: "The memory is then most susceptible and tenacious of impressions," he said, "and the learning of languages being chiefly a work of memory, it seems precisely fitted to the powers of this period." Could chartered grammar schools with a Greek and Latin focus succeed in some communities?

What, in the end, can we make of Thomas Jefferson's vision for education? In the same DePauw University speech, David McCullough concluded, of the Founding Fathers:

"The fact that they all rose to the occasion and did what they did, accomplished what they did against the most horrendous odds, is the real miracle. And the more I know about that period, the more I read about it, and the more I come to understand it, the more convinced I am that it's a miracle that the United States ever happened."

We may need another miracle in the 21st century. If the experiment with freedom that is the United States is to be preserved — from social fragmentation within and totalitarian designs abroad, we may need leaders of the caliber of that first generation.

Can that generation tell us how to prepare actors for the next great historic drama? (3)

## Endnotes

1) This quotation of Jefferson's is the exception as to source. All the other quotes in this essay are from Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, but this one, in which he cautions against compulsory schooling, is from an attachment to a Sept. 9, 1817, letter Jefferson wrote to Joseph C. Cabell. The attachment is called "An Act for Establishing Elementary Schools."

2) "The Legacy of 'All Deliberate Speed,'" Education Week, May 19, 2004

3) Capsule description of Jefferson's own early education: "Jefferson was born at Shadwell in Albemarle county, Virginia on April 13, 1743. He was tutored by the Reverend James Maury, a learned man, in the finest classical tradition. He began the study of Latin, Greek, and French at the age of 9. He attended William and Mary College in Williamsburg at sixteen years old . . ."

Jefferson was forever grateful for his early education in the classical languages. In 1800, in a letter to British scientist Joseph Priestly, Jefferson wrote: "I think the Greeks and Romans have left us the present models which exist of fine composition, whether we examine them as works of reason, or of style and fancy; and to them we probably owe these characteristics of modern composition . . . To all this I add, that to read the Latin and Greek authors in their original is a sublime luxury; and I deem luxury in science [possession of knowledge] to be at least as justifiable as in architecture, painting, gardening, or the other arts." — Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, 1800. ME 10:146

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Published June 28, 2007