



The Sacred Fire of Liberty

with **E.D. Hirsch, Jr.**, professor *emeritus*,
University of Virginia
& **Andrew J. Rotherham**,
Co-Founder and Partner, Bellwether Education

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ANDREW ROTHERHAM: Good afternoon, I'm Andrew Rotherham, a co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education. We're a national non-profit organization committed to dramatically improving educational outcomes for low-income youngsters in this country. We are a hybrid organization, part think tank and part support organization, working directly with leading-edge ventures and leaders around the country.

Through its work, Pioneer shows that education does not have to be a partisan issue.

I want to start by thanking Jim, Jamie, and the Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) for having me today. I'm a board member at DFER, so perhaps they didn't have any choice, but I'm grateful to Pioneer for the opportunity. And on behalf of Joe Williams, greetings.

Through its work, Pioneer shows that education does not have to be a partisan issue. On the contrary, when it comes to education we can usually find so much more to disagree about than partisan politics.

But more seriously, the man I'm honored to introduce today shows the same. Ideas and coalitions in education transcend convenient partisan delineations. In fact, if anything, it's the out of control tribalism and partisanship in education that has stood in the way of the power of many of his ideas.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., retired *emeritus* professor of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, is the author of numerous books, including *The Knowledge Deficit*. Hirsch is founder and chairman of the nonprofit Core Knowledge Foundation, which has helped reshape the curriculum in hundreds of schools around the country. He has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the International Academy of Education, and is the recipient of numerous honorary degrees and awards, including the AFT's 1997 QuEST award.

Andrew J. Rotherham is Co-Founder and Partner of Bellwether Education and author of Eduwonk.com. He is also co-founder and publisher of *Education Sector*, an independent national education policy think tank. He has served in policymaking roles at national and state levels and helped launch several education reform organizations.

But before I get to all that; let me back up to the honored part.

Don Hirsch has been an influence on me not only for what he has taught me through his work, but also through how he lives his life and his deep and unwavering commitment to improving our schools.

I know many in this room feel the same way.

Don's work has been at the leading edge of a push for better curriculum and consequently, better schools.

His ideas have broad implications for how we think about teacher quality, content and curriculum, and more fundamentally, even how we think about our society and civic participation in it.

As most of you surely know, Don was first an English scholar. He studied theories about interpretations of texts and is an authority on Wordsworth. And if you've ever heard him read a poem aloud, as I was once privileged to at a meeting in Chicago, you can see that it was an avocation and vocation for him.

So as with some others, he had a rich and impactful career having little to do with education before he turned his hand to this issue.

But while doing some research unrelated to education he realized the same two elemental issues that animate so many reformers:

His ideas have broad implications for how we think about teacher quality, content and curriculum, and more fundamentally, even how we think about our society and civic participation in it.

First, our schools are dramatically under-serving some students – in fact, systematically, they are absolutely failing the most vulnerable amongst us.

And, second, it doesn't have to be that way.

But as a result of his other interests and research, as well as serendipity, this English professor identified a serious problem that was different

from many of the other issues you hear bandied about in the education debate:

Curriculum.

Content.

Or rather the lack thereof and why they matter so much to teaching and learning and how the education system evolved to a point where not only did we pay insufficient attention to them, but the very idea of curriculum and shared knowledge became suspect or considered to be a sideshow.

Don's ideas are hardly conservative in the political sense. On the contrary, they're profoundly egalitarian.

It's worth pausing on this point. Unfortunately, in our politically dysfunctional field, the idea of a core curriculum and shared knowledge is often seen as a right-wing idea. Alternatively, those given to self-flattery about just how revolutionary the times we live in really are, see content a mere feeder stream for learning. They deride content as fungible in this brave new technological world we inhabit where "new" and "21st century skills"- like critical thinking and problem solving - are romanticized at the expense of content and knowledge and with insufficient attention to what it genuinely takes to transform teaching and learning.

Politically, it surely didn't help that Don's seminal book, *Cultural Literacy*, came out at about the same time as Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and was consequently injected into the culture wars alongside it. But that's our field's fault, not his. Don's books say what they say if one takes the time to read them.

As to content and curriculum, it doesn't matter what kids read, as long as they're reading something, or so the argument goes. Is there a more vain or ahistorical sentiment in education? Never mind that it ignores that throughout the ages there has been some content and ideas that societies felt was so important it should be written down and preserved. Sometimes openly or and not infrequently surreptitiously. Christian monks, Muslim scholars, and Buddhist thinkers labored

to preserve certain fundamental ideas about the nature of man, society, justice, and ways of living and experiencing the human life.

But that idea is also at odds with what we know about how people learn and acquire domain knowledge and skills in the first place. And how important content is to reading and understanding. That's why the divides in this debate don't always fall along education's traditional lines. The American Federation of Teachers, for instance, has long championed Don's work because they understand how central clearly-defined content is to learning.

So Don's ideas are hardly conservative in the political sense. On the contrary, they're profoundly egalitarian. Throughout history elites in society have always had "21st Century Skills" including such allegedly new necessities as understanding and engaging with technology and the world at large. Those are fundamental paths for human progress from the days when the Phoenicians sailed the Mediterranean to the race for the moon and other contemporary advances. The challenge today is democratizing that kind of education both to increase individual opportunity and also our collective good.

That's why Don's ideas are timely. Perhaps now more than at any time over the past two decades.

For starters, the country is engaged in a national conversation about our schools. National standards are getting a lot of airtime and greater commonality of standards, if not common standards, seems almost assured.

Meanwhile those minimizing content and curriculum and romanticizing skills are gaining traction because of the seductive, albeit superficial, allure of their argument.

And there is growing attention to the abject poverty of our civic and political discourse and the deleterious consequences of this over time.

Three things about Don's work have resonance in this context:

First, he's unabashed about the importance of shared knowledge as a tool of social equity. As we debate standards, who should go to college and what the expectations for school performance should be, the idea of commonness matters. It's

not undemocratic, as some claim, rather creating a shared and level playing field is the most 'small d' democratic thing we can do.

Second, he's been unafraid to make some hard choices. In education we often eschew hard choices by going for the easy option of "both." Rick Hess has characterized this as "expansionist multiculturalism." Don has laid out a curriculum that doesn't have "everything."

Yet those choices are hardly exclusionist or prescriptive. On the contrary, where too many schools teach about Mexico by using tacos and salsa and about the settlement of this country by making paper cut outs of Native American headbands, the curriculum that Don has developed has depth and breadth and cultivates an informed understanding of our shared heritage by grounding it in history and culture, ours and that of the world we inhabit.

That's the joke.

The curriculum derided by its critics as celebrating dead white men is actually among the most substantively multicultural out there. It teaches about the world in a rich way that fosters understanding, not food and trivia.

Finally and on a personal note, a lesser man would have walked away. The venom that was directed at him, the name calling, snubs large and small, and all the rest would have quickly convinced most people to return to whatever it was they were doing before they came to education and this crazy intellectual environment that passes for normal intercourse in our field. Instead, his books may be getting shorter, but their punch and relevance is getting stronger.

Now I've talked a lot about Don, but that's for a reason. As you'll see in a few minutes when he steps up here, even in the autumn he's a force.

But let me just say a few words about the larger issue of civics education that we're here to discuss.

- The nation is fighting a multi-front war against an enemy that too many of our citizens barely understand at all from the perspective of history, religion, or culture.
- We are debating weighty issues with profound

implications for our Republic in a spirit more akin to how we cheer on a sports franchise than how a great democracy should deliberate.

- American student performance on key measures of history and civic literacy should greatly trouble us. We're not talking about trivia here but the basic sequence and trajectory of American history and how our fundamental institutions work, and why.
- Finally, too many of our schools struggle to deliver a powerful instructional program without resorting to dead end strategies of test prep. Even though we know from research and experience that a rich curriculum and actual teaching let the tests take care of themselves.

Don Hirsch has shown us a way to address these challenges – and boost reading achievement and literacy at the same time because of the keen relationship between content and reading ability. But rather than beat a path to his door, to imitate or learn, too often this field still beats a path to him armed with torches and pitchforks.

As you'll see in a minute, that's our loss. And on this vital issue of educating citizens who can carry on our most sacred traditions long after all of us in this room are gone, we can't afford to let the petty ideologies that too frequently drive our field distract us from the magnitude of the challenge we face and the solutions that are in our grasp today.

That's why it's an honor and a pleasure to present to you, from the University of Virginia, Don Hirsch.

E.D. HIRSCH: “The sacred fire of liberty” is a phrase from Washington’s first inaugural address, a short speech that he worked on assiduously, and discussed with James Madison. In my earlier life as an English teacher I would have had a heyday discussing with my class the phrase, “the sacred fire of liberty.” I’d start off asking about the way it connects American politics with the holy. In pronouncing that phrase, George Washington began a tradition that was destined to go far beyond the customary invocation “God Bless the United States of America.” But he was not just asking for Divine protection. He was claiming that our new political system actually carries out a Divine purpose.

Some 50 years later, in 1838, a young but deep Abraham Lincoln, then in his twenties, said in his Lyceum speech:

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap - let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; - let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; - let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Lincoln makes Washington’s religious metaphors even more explicit. We live, Lincoln said, under a “political religion,” which was an odd pairing of words in a country that separates church and state. But both Lincoln and Washington exhibited a post-Enlightenment willingness to commit a rather daring heresy by combining the secular with the sacred. Deists both, their metaphors identified our secular political religion with the pre-Christian, pagan rituals of Ancient Greece. The sacred fire that must never be allowed to go out was watched over by vestal virgins at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi upon whose altars animals were sacrificed. But on this new continent, instead of killing animals upon altars, our sacrifices will be to protect liberty with our own bodies, and more often, to subordinate our private interests to the public good – the chief sacrifice that good citizens are called upon to make in a Republic.

Such disinterestedness was the chief theme of Washington’s first inaugural address. He praised the members of Congress for their willingness to sacrifice local interest for the good of the whole. And of course he was implicitly urging them to live up to this praise. He also took time to explain that he would accept no salary for serving as president. He wanted to be, and indeed he became the very paragon of patriotic disinterestedness. He offered to members of Congress “the tribute that is due to the talents, the rectitude, and the patriotism which adorn their characters.” “In these honorable qualifications,” he went on, “I behold the surest pledges that ... no local prejudices or attachments, no separate views nor party animosities, will

misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests.”

Note the phrase “local prejudices or attachments.” It was a theme very much on his mind throughout the rest of his life. It was to appear again in Washington’s last will and testament, where he bequeathed a portion of his estate to “to spread systematic ideas through all parts of this rising Empire, thereby to do away local attachments and State prejudices.”

Madison’s colleagues shared the view that because republican government is so precariously dependent on the loyal sentiments of its citizens, and because other, more selfish sentiments are always dangerously ready to assert themselves.

And where was Washington’s bequest directed in order to achieve this patriotic goal? To education. The schools were to be the means of subordinating local interests to the common good of the Federation. And the schools, under the watchful eye of textbook writers who copied one another, proceeded to carry out their appointed task. By the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote admiringly that “In the United States the general thrust of education is directed toward political life. In Europe its main aim is to fit men for private life.” The community-oriented character of American schooling in the first century of the Republic was the result of deliberate policy by political leaders in the aftermath of the Revolution. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration thought that American schools should offer a common curriculum designed to create “republican machines.” His sentiments were similar to the educational views of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and of the most important early schoolmaster of all, Noah Webster. The schools were to be indoctrination factories for democracy, designed to develop critical thinkers and able citizens in a context of loyalty to the common good of the nation. Early schoolbook authors began a long tradition of texts that aimed, in the words of one successful early writer “to exhibit in a strong light the principles of religious and political freedom which our forefathers

professed ... and to record the numerous examples of fortitude, courage, and patriotism which have rendered them illustrious.”

The reasons for this communitarian emphasis were obvious to American leaders in the 19th century. Loyalty to the Federation had to be developed in the citizens, as well as adherence to Enlightenment ideals of liberty and toleration. For, without universal indoctrination by the schools in such civic virtues, the United States might dissolve, they feared, as had all prior republics of history, through internal dissension. This was a much-discussed theme at the founding. When Franklin was leaving the constitutional convention, a woman asked him whether they had created a monarchy or a republic, to which he famously replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.” Madison had stated the root problem in *Federalist #55*: “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust: So there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.” This was therefore to be a chief function of the schools. Madison’s colleagues shared the view that because republican government is so precariously dependent on the loyal sentiments of its citizens, and because other, more selfish sentiments are always dangerously ready to assert themselves, the schools have a critical role to play not just in affording equality of opportunity, but also in inculcating “the political religion of the nation.” The aim of schooling was not just to Americanize the immigrants, but also to Americanize the Americans. This was the inspiring ideal of the common school in the 19th century, built upon a combination of thrilling ideals and existential worry.

For all its shortcomings, the American common school of the 19th century became a success, as did the nation itself. By the end of the century we were educating, relative to other countries, a large percentage of the population, and this forward movement continued well into the twentieth century. In the post-World War II period, the U. S. ranked first internationally on a number of educational measures. But by 1980, there had occurred a significant decline in our international position and in comparison with our own past

achievements. Two decades ago I was appalled by an international comparison showing that between 1978 and 1988 the science knowledge of American students had dropped from 7th to 15th place. In the post-war period we have declined internationally from the first quartile in reading to the third, dropping from third place to 15th place among the nations measured.

The root cause of this decline, starting in the 1960s, was, by then, a decades-old complacency on the part of school leaders and the nation at large. In the early twentieth century existential worries about the stability of the Federation had subsided, and by the 1930s, under the enduring influence of European romanticism, educational leaders had begun to convert the community-centered school of the 19th century to the child-centered school of the 20th – a process that was complete by 1950.

The chief tenet of the child-centered school was that no bookish curriculum was to be set out in advance. Rather, learning was to arise naturally out of activities and projects. A 1939 critic of the new movement, Isaac Kandel, described it this way: “Children should be allowed to grow in accordance with their needs and interests. . . . Knowledge is valuable only as it is acquired in a real situation; the teacher must be present to provide the proper environment for experiencing but must not intervene except to guide and advise. There must, in fact, be “nothing fixed in advance” and subjects must not be “set-out-to-be-learned.” . . . No reference was ever made to the curriculum or its content.” By 1950, with new, watered-down schoolbooks, and a completely new generation of ed-school-trained teachers, the anti-bookish, child-centered viewpoint had taken over the schools.

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By mid century the child-centered point of view had become an intellectual monopoly, because of the following accident of history. Just when our schools were expanding to serve our growing population, the modest normal schools that had trained school teachers were being absorbed as

schools of education into colleges and universities. In the 1920s there was a huge expansion of education schools. Between 1910 and 1930, eighty-eight normal schools in the United States turned into teachers colleges that were to be staffed by graduates of the mother of American teacher-training institutions, Teachers College Columbia. These hundreds of prospective teachers and professors of education had listened raptly to the lectures of the new theorists, including John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick; Kilpatrick, author of the most influential pedagogical pamphlet in American educational history—“The Project Method” of 1918, which said that projects are better than books and lectures. By the 1940s thousands of schools had already put the project method into practice.

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I want to show you a short video, through the magic of YouTube and the computer. It’s an excerpt from a 1936 newsreel called “The March of Time.” Most of you are far too young to remember these newsreels that always ended with the sonorous pronouncement: “TIME MARCHES ON.” You can find the full segment on YouTube under “Progressive Education in the 1940s.” The whole thing lasts about 7 minutes, and I have cut it in half to save time.

(Video excerpt)

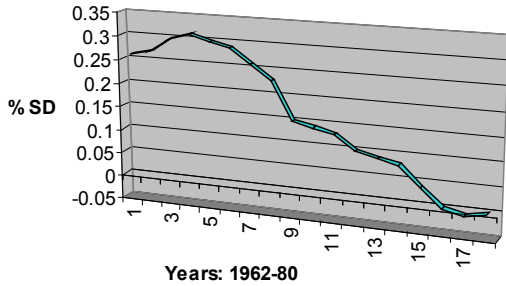
Let’s look at the results. If a child began public school in 1950, the effects of her 12 years of schooling would show up in 12th-grade tests in 1962. I now want to show you some graphs of educational achievement from 1962 to 1980.

This first graph shows the results of the Iowa Test of Educational Development. It is not a selective test. It is given to every junior and senior in the state. It’s therefore an important barometer of school history that cannot be attributed to demographic change. Between 1962 and 1980 Iowa simply did not change demographically.

It remained 98 percent white and middle class throughout the period, and so did the students attending its schools.

**The Iowa Test of Educational Development
Given to all Seniors in the State**

Iowa Test: 1962-80

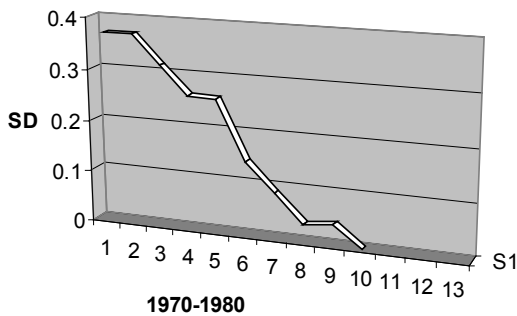


Now I want to show you another graph.

It's the trend of civics knowledge among 12th graders as measured by NAEP, known as the nation's report card. Unfortunately, NAEP has rarely made a probe of 12th-grade civics knowledge - only three times since 1970, so we don't have a lot to go on. But what we do have is very telling. It's also telling, considering one of the main purposes of American schooling, that NAEP has probed civics knowledge so rarely. It would have been the first thing Madison and Lincoln would have wanted to probe.

U.S. 12th Grade Civics Knowledge

Civics 1970-1980

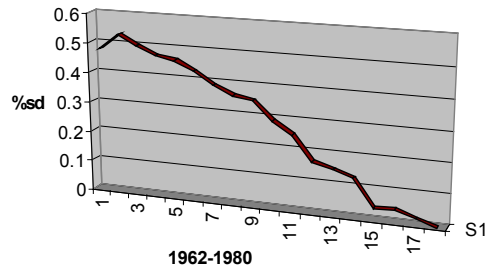


The details of this graph still need to get the approval of some statisticians, but all agree with

the downward trend. The significant decline of civics knowledge is important not just in itself, but also as an indicator of the general change that was occurring in American schools. Civics is a school subject. If students do not know civics it is mostly because the schools have not taught it to them, a fact that reflects not just irresponsible complacency about the proper function of schools in a democracy, but also the more general anti-intellectual orientation and complacency of the schools towards merely academic subjects.

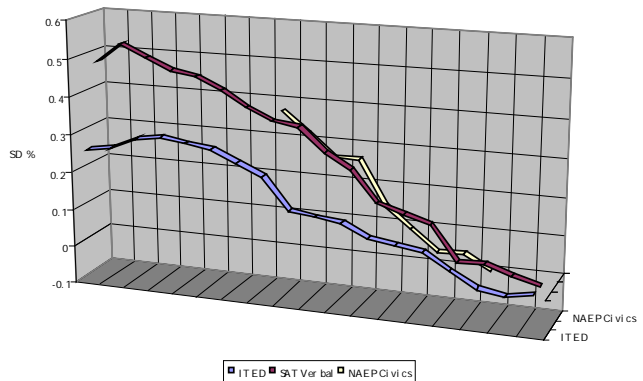
And here, finally is another graph, you may be more familiar with: the decline of scores on the Verbal SAT.

SAT Verbal Scores 1962-1980



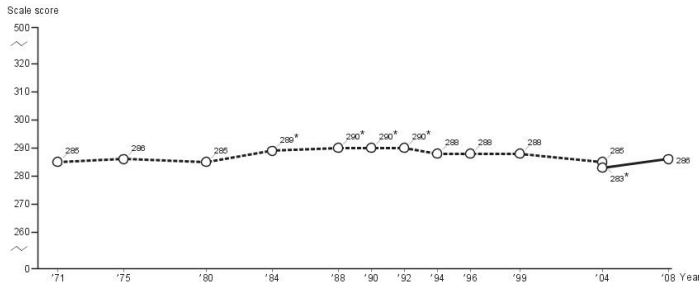
Now, if we put these graphs together, we get a picture of what happened to American schooling between 1950 and 1980, the period of the great decline, from which we have not recovered. The trend lines have remained essentially flat since that time.

**U.S. 12th Grade Achievement
1962-1980**



Amidst these downward trends, Congress authorized “The Nation’s Report Card,” NAEP, in 1969. Here is the subsequent trend line in 12th-grade reading achievement:

12th Grade Reading Achievement



A 12th-grade reading test is chiefly a test of general knowledge. It is also an excellent predictor of adult competence. The decline in knowledge about the sacred fire of liberty is part and parcel of a long-term decline in knowledge about all the other academic subjects learned in school: science, art, literature, history. It is a national decline that originated in a national complacency which is very foreign to the origins and best traditions of the nation. Keynes said that ideas are more powerful than is commonly understood. “Indeed the world is ruled by little else.” We started upon a downward path when the fuzzy ideas of Dewey replaced the hard-nosed ideas of Madison. To grasp that nettle we will to show some intellectual daring. We will need to say that a definite, highly specific core curriculum for the schools is not, after all, an unthinkable idea. It became unthinkable only when the complacent anti-curricular movement began to dominate American schools six decades ago. Now we had better be willing to think it.

Thank you.



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