
Prologue

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Welcome to *American Experiment Quarterly's* Special Commencement Issue, where school is out, but education is in.

Two themes weave through five of the six pieces that follow about education in Minnesota and the nation. The first is that broad questions of governance and incentives matter greatly when it comes to children—especially poor and minority children—performing better academically. This is a modest departure of emphasis from much of what the Center has published over the years, which has leaned in the direction of addressing curricular and more elusive cultural impediments to learning. By no means is this to say we've ignored the kinds of policy and structural issues pursued here; after all, we probably have published more about school choice—specifically in vigorous support of the kind that includes private and religious schools—than any other organization in the state. Add what Chester E. Finn contributes about the importance of accountability in almost every issue of the journal, and we have been touching all the right bases for a long time when it comes to reforming education in actual fact, not

just rhetorical flourish. But it's nevertheless true that we haven't been as occupied as others when it comes to the kinds of arguments, for example, articulated by Frederick Hess, Ted Kolderie or Curt Johnson and Neal Peirce in their essays. Each of these pieces probes American schools to their organizational core.

A second integrating theme pertains to school choice, expansively defined. It is striking to recall that it was only twenty years ago when many education establishmentarians in Minnesota were reduced to flummoxed flailing after Gov. Rudy Perpich bravely proposed that freedom should no longer remain abridged by attendance boundaries (the "Berlin Walls" of American education), but that families should have the right to send their children to public schools in a neighboring district if that was their choice and if there was room in the receiving district. A Minneapolis school official nervously asked at the time: "How do we know who our students are? How do we design programs and staffing?"

While serious disagreements persist, of course, over vouchers and tax credits, the happy fact is that other forms of

educational freedom have become mainstream and everyday. This includes open enrollments, post-secondary options, and charter schools—all of which started in Minnesota. I recall Dr. Finn, in an American Experiment program about a dozen years ago, arguing that as choice proposals and policies grew bolder, those previously seen as wild and tutti-frutti were coming to be viewed, routinely and in short order, as mild and vanilla. That dynamic continues. Points and lessons here being twofold: school choice of one kind or another plays more of an expected than terribly provocative or contentious role in these papers. And to the purposeful extent that educational freedom disrupts the status quo, it's increasingly recognized that the end product is not likely to be bureaucratic chaos (as school officials scolded back then), but real progress for real kids. Or to frame this last matter more directly: whether kids learn and achieve ought to be the key consideration in education policy-making; not whether grown-ups are inconvenienced.

The spring 2004 *AEQ* opens up with the introductory chapter from Mr. Hess's terrific new book, *Common Sense School Reform*. You may remember his timely essay in the spring 2003 issue of the journal in the aftermath of the Trent Lott/Strom Thurmond mess: "'Trust Us,' They Explained: Racial Distrust and School Reform." Rick Hess, a resident scholar and political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute, has rapidly become one of the nation's most acute and prolific education scholars. His new book—

which will be out by the time he leads an American Experiment Luncheon Forum on June 22—will only accelerate his rise and deepen his contribution. Here are excerpts from his first chapter.

Common sense reform is straightforward. It focuses on two precepts: accountability and flexibility. Centuries of experience in fields from architecture to zoology tell us that people work harder, smarter, and more efficiently when they are rewarded for doing so; that they can get lazy or distracted when left to their own devices; that people do their best work when goals are clear and they know how they'll be evaluated; and that smart, educated, motivated people will find ways to succeed. Common sense reform sets as its guiding beacon the goal of constructing a culture of competence in schools; a culture where success is expected, excellence is rewarded, and failure is not tolerated.

Several pages later he adds:

Look, let me be clear. Common sense reformers respect the romantic impulse in education. We know that schooling is the one institution of civilization where we not only shape the social arrangements in which we live but where we forge the hearts and minds that will create our shared future. Common sense reform will not turn schools into callous factories of learning but rescue students and educators from a barren system in which excellence is a happy accident that results when fine educators happen to cluster in pleasing environs. Because common sense reformers embrace the sacred and democratic purposes of

schooling, we believe educational excellence is too important to be left to good intentions and chance.

In the same way that Rick Hess will wind up having written one of the most important books about education in 2004, Abigail Thernstrom (along with her husband Stephan Thernstrom) is the author of one the most important books in the field in 2003, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. A senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, Dr. Thernstrom led an American Experiment Luncheon Forum in January, at which she said essential things like the following about policy, culture, and morality.

The racial gap in academic achievement between whites and Asians, on the one hand, and blacks and Hispanics, on the other hand, is an educational crisis. But it is also the nation's most important civil rights issue. It is an American tragedy and a national emergency—for which **there are not good excuses**. . . .

People have asked us why we use the word “culture,” which seems to imply an inheritance impervious to change. We did hesitate, precisely because we worried the term would be misunderstood. But our assumption is quite different: that cultural traits are shaped and reshaped by the environment. Hard work, for instance, is a culturally transferable skill, and—more important—**schools** can play an invaluable part in shaping values, habits, and skills.

In this oral essay titled “No Excuses: Closing America’s Racial Gap in Learning,” Abby quotes the head of the Fred-

erick Douglass Academy in Harlem, who asks: “Are we conservative here?” Answering his own rhetorical question, he says: “Of course we are. We teach middle-class values like responsibility.” Abby cites another school leader of like mind: “We are fighting a battle involving skills and values. We are not afraid to set social norms.”

Whereas Dr. Thernstrom’s purview is national, Jon Bacal’s is local in, “No Excuses: Closing the Twin Cities’ Racial Gap in Learning.” He argues (and I wouldn’t disagree) that the key development over the past year has been Minnesota’s belated awareness of the “abysmal” school performance of, and vast achievement gap between, white kids and kids of color. He cites data, for instance, showing that among forty states with sizable black enrollments, Minnesota ranked thirty-ninth in black graduation rates in 2001. The graduation rate for white kids in the state that year was 87 percent; for blacks, it was less than half, at 43 percent.

As for what to do, as several other authors in this package do, Mr. Bacal writes enthusiastically about the need to create new schools—which is really to say charter schools—in what has come to be coined the “open sector.” As for where one might find such a place, I’d suggest envisioning a creative space where maneuverability is prized and monopolies are not. Curt Johnson and Neal Peirce, in the paper following Jon’s, characterize it this way: “Advocates of an ‘open sector’ argue that the critical question is not ‘what’ but ‘how’—how to induce different behavior within the

system of education.” Think of “outside” players and influences and refigured incentives.

Mr. Bacal, the executive director of SchoolStart, a nonprofit service provider to new charter schools, argues that, Minneapolis and St. Paul schools should “embrace a radical redefinition of their roles” rather than futilely resist a tide of expanding choice.

Central office administrators and school boards can get out of the school management business and into the performance contracting business. They can issue a national request for proposals, encouraging their own best educators and the most proven school providers and models to offer exciting new school options for urban families. Districts can limit their own role to selecting, monitoring, and evaluating performance contracts with schools. Meanwhile, they can give their own schools the freedom—and accountability—they need to achieve their full potential, and hand over control of staffing, budgets, and programs. The two districts contain hundreds of creative, capable educators and administrators whose potential talents and energies are waiting to be fully tapped.

Messrs. Johnson and Peirce also have an urban focus in “Changing School **Systems**,” a paper they originally wrote for CEOs for Cities, “a national, nonpartisan alliance of mayors, business executives, university presidents, and nonprofit leaders working to strengthen the economic competitiveness of cities.” They don’t tarry in opening up:

The civic leaders of every city and region must confront a stark fact: getting better results from schools is the only way to assure that their communities will succeed as places where people will want to live and work. In more and more places around the country, leaders are concluding that this challenge is not just another civic project, but a serious condition that may require fundamental changes in the way the “system” works.

They quote Chicago’s current Mayor Daley, who has said: “While everybody tells me how great it is to live in [Chicago], their first question is ‘Where can I send my child to school?’ What they mean is a **good** school, not just any school. And, too often, I don’t have an answer for them.”

Curt Johnson and Neal Peirce are principals with the Citistates Group, Mr. Peirce also being a syndicated columnist, and Mr. Johnson having served as head of the Twin Cities-based Citizens League. As with Mr. Bacal above, they write about need creating new schools, insofar as “we cannot get the schools we need by only fixing the ones we have.” I’m grateful to CEOs for Cities for the opportunity to round out this compendium with this very good paper.

Initiatives such as charter schools and conceptions such as open sectors don’t trace back exclusively to any one person, including Ted Kolderie, a co-founder of Education | Evolving. But if do they have an intellectual godfather, he’s it.

In “Freeing Teachers: The Promise of Teacher Professional Partnerships,”

Mr. Kolderie outlines a radically different way of employing teachers—so much so that calling them “employees” is no longer an accurate way of describing their relationship with “employer” school boards in the first place. This is what Ted—who also is a former executive director of the Citizens League—has in mind: “It is clearly possible to organize K-12 education on a professional model. Teachers could have and should have the option to work if they wish—as many architects and engineers and consultants and accountants and lawyers and doctors do—with colleagues, in a professional group they collectively own, with the administrators working for them.”

Later he writes that this new arrangement—which can be found in avant garde places like Henderson, Minnesota, and Milwaukee across the border—is not a substitute for various changes that need to be made in teaching, such as improving training, recruitment, and retention. Rather, it’s a “new and different framework in which these efforts to change and improve teaching can be carried out.” It’s a fascinating idea and paper.

I take the next essay by Jack Miller personally. As I wrote almost a year ago following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in two affirmative action cases involving the University of Michigan, I was less than a stellar student in high school and started my own college career at a community college in New York. Actually, it was a temporary adjunct to a community college, since I couldn’t get into the main part of the

school itself, but who’s still counting? Suffice it to say, I have bountiful gratitude for two-year colleges and what they can do for students—and not just those, like myself, who founder early.

Mr. Miller is a long-time professor of English at Normandale Community College in Bloomington who likewise is an admirer of these under-respected institutions and the hands-on teaching that goes on in them. After properly criticizing notions of “diversity” that over-stress race, he recommends, in “Appreciating Community Colleges: ‘In Many Ways, the Best Education,’” taking a “drive someday to your local community college, park in that big lot made for commuter students, have a look at the variety of people you see and don’t forget that this variety you may be seeing as only skin-deep is much greater under the surface.” And he concludes: “When that high school senior you know is pondering the immediate future, urge him or her to consider this slighted resource as very likely the best first step to academic and vocational success.” It worked for me.

Moving on. American Experiment did a certain amount of work on national security before 9/11, but we’ve done substantially more since, publishing pieces on issues including border security, weapons of mass destruction, and a symposium in which thirty-four writers considered whether the “Bush Doctrine” constitutes a “preemptive path to peace” or a “recipe for perpetual war”? The critical topic this time around, insightfully addressed, is the importance of religious liberty in what is nothing short of civilizational combat.

Elizabeth Ann Massopust, a recent Princeton graduate and a former American Experiment intern, and Nathaniel Zylstra, a Minneapolis lawyer, each worked in the Washington office of the Hudson Institute on questions of religious liberty around the world. Here's a passage from their paper, "Religious Freedom and the War on Terror."

[W]here military intervention and humanitarian aid will fall short, the promotion of religious freedom as a central aim of U.S. diplomatic interventions is a means of addressing the victim mentality that pervades the Islamic world and, importantly, may serve to quell the belief, at least among moderate Muslims, that governments—especially their own—are the enemies of Islam.

One can only pray the tolerant and peaceful pursuit works.

A short—and, I would like to think, tolerant—essay of my own is next, "A Note on the Same-Sex Marriage

Debate." I wrote it for a variety of reasons, not least being the "remarkable" way in which "those who have been pushing for the most fundamental change in society's most fundamental institution have had a largely free ride," as they have "claimed the moral high ground, and relatively few men and women have been inclined to challenge them in effectively robust rhetorical or political ways." Agree? Disagree? Either way, I welcome your thoughts, just as I do about everything in this edition of *American Experiment Quarterly*. Letters to the editor are especially appreciated.

For an education epilogue, we finish off, as usual, with several columns by Chester E. Finn Jr., this time on pork (or is it tofu?); on the "discipline paradox"; and whether No Child Left Behind is an unfunded mandate.

And with that, girls and boys, moms and dads, enjoy the summer. ■