

## SETTING EDUCATION ARIGHT

*Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*  
by Charles Murray (New York: Crown Forum, 2008)

As democracy continues to democratize—that is, as it subjects society continuously and increasingly to its penchant for equality—it faces one fundamental and natural obstacle. Tocqueville identified this obstacle for us: “Intellectual inequality comes directly from God, and man cannot prevent it from existing always.” The renowned conservative social scientist Charles Murray has spent much of his career uncovering “value free” evidence for this fact and investigating the effects that differences in intelligence, and our denial of those differences, pose for American democracy. A real virtue of *Real Education* is that Murray identifies both the attainable equality to which democracy can aspire and precisely the necessary inequality that democracy needs. And he points out the paths to get us there.

Our educational romantics assume that everyone is equally teachable, that every child would succeed at equal, developmentally correct speed, if only there were more money, better teachers, a more demanding curriculum, and the like. But Murray objects, and persuasively so, pithily citing the requisite scientific studies to prove it. It is not simply that half our students are below average. Ability doesn't just vary, it varies a lot. Those athletes of the mind who can read and understand *Hamlet* are

just as spare in number as those athletes of the body who can play in the NFL. And more than 70 percent of students in the eighth grade really do have trouble making a simple inference that would allow them to understand that adding 10 percent to ninety gives you ninety-nine. So our schools must in fact leave students behind in the end, having subjected them to a regimen that dooms them to failure (and in the process, boring the better and unchallenged students nearly to death).

But here is where Murray's argument gets interesting. Instead of remaining in denial, leaving the bottom half behind—and not just behind but humiliated at failing at what democracy expects of them—we can give them the respect which all human beings are due, in two ways. We can prepare them to make a living, and we can give them a real education, a liberal education. This applies not only to the bottom half, but to all those who would not go to a four-year residential college in Murray's best of all possible (real) worlds. In this regard, Murray recommends adoption of E. D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Curriculum for all students in the elementary and middle school years (and

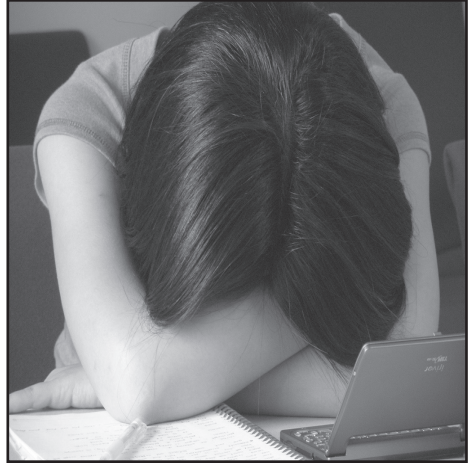
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carried over to high school for those who continue in school). Sharing both a common citizenship and a common human dignity, all Americans, to the degree possible for them, can share in the truths about themselves and their world that are transmitted through genuine liberal learning. This social egalitarianism is the attainable and genuine equality I spoke of above, a proportional equality mediated by our common civilizational patrimony.

But what about the top half, or the top 10 percent, those capable of going much faster than the developmentally correct speed? In truth, most of Murray's book is concerned with how to educate a new and truly worthy political elite, or a revived American aristocracy. The opening proposition of this part of the argument is that "too many people are going to college," and about this, Murray has two overarching and interrelated themes. First, most people don't have to spend four years at a college to acquire the abilities that would prepare them for a job or profession. The run-of-the-mill B.A., moreover, is becoming a less precise and hence less useful signal to employers. But Murray's more fundamental concern is that the vast numbers of students attending college who are not capable of doing real college work have diluted and distorted what should be a college's true work, which is providing a truly higher education for those who can benefit from it.

If you are strict like Murray, you would say that only 9-12 percent of our seventeen-year-olds should go to college, which means that more than three times the number are now attending as actually should. It is easy to see the distortions that this malapportionment of students imposes on the contemporary college or university. Why is it that hardly any college requires of all students demanding survey courses any more? Why is it that even in the core



*Suffering from an unreal education*

disciplines embarrassingly narrow or fluff courses can meet both major and distribution requirements? It is not only politically correct and increasingly ill-educated faculty who are responsible for this, but also the simple fact of too many students. Because a truly higher education means taking on the tough stuff, the idea that everyone should go to college has, over time, made a true liberal education harder and harder to find. Luckily though, for training in most professions the four-year college really is becoming obsolete. Except for law and medicine, four years is almost always longer than necessary to become licensed, and increased use of alternative forms of certification is not only a better and fairer way to signal one's qualifications to a potential employer, but also can be used to undermine the "unliberal arts" B.A. for many students. Other stars are aligning, Murray observes. There is no need anymore for a physical library. Close proximity is no longer required for collegiality. And even the best teachers are available through distance learning. Pre-professional preparation is poised to be taken away from the colleges.

Even more, Murray says, college today is not at all what it's cracked up to be. In particular, it is overrated as a place to grow

up. He describes what many of us know. Most students are able to get by with a light workload, Fridays and Saturdays are not taken seriously, faculty are often too accommodating to students, and grade inflation has undermined the transcript. Character is not only left undeveloped but is in fact positively harmed both by the campus social culture and by the naïve relativism and non-judgmentalism of the intellectual atmosphere. In a footnote, Murray even brings up Tom Wolfe's *Charlotte Simmons*, appealing to our greatest novelist's true account of the souls of students and professors at our elite colleges. Who would want it?

Though Murray seems to under-appreciate the love and charm still present—at least at Southern colleges such as the one at which I am privileged to teach—his polemic against the contemporary college and university is really meant to raze the ground for a restoration. America's very future, Murray rightly says, depends on how we educate the academically gifted: more so, one infers, than on how we train the "workforce." And here Murray speaks what our Bard would call *sweet sooth*. Our elites are smart already, but they are not wise. They mean well, but they do not know virtue. And so, for both a renewal of virtuous citizenship and of a higher wisdom about specifically human life, Murray proposes a revival of classical liberal education.

Murray, the social scientist, is not as precise and coherent in speaking of the substance of this education as he is in other parts of his argument. But he does defend the truth that there can be as much rigor in forming judgments and in thinking about the human good as there is rigor in mathematics and the physical and natural sciences. He rightly identifies Aristotle's virtue of prudence, or *phronesis*, as the virtue concerned with right judgment about

particulars and the highest virtue of the citizen or statesman. And while part of that virtue cannot be taught (the knack for making sense of complicated situations), he notes that sound logic and pattern recognition through the reading of histories are important for its development.

Murray's higher wisdom is chiefly a wisdom about ourselves, about human nature and the wonders in our souls. He seems to see the work of the great poets in particular (he mentions Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy) as the richest source of such wisdom and as the best antidote to the superficiality of today's stunted *aristoi*. He would like our elites to learn that human excellences are hard to acquire; he would like their pride chastened by a reflection on how much of what they are and of what they have is a gift, and on the fact that even with their smarts they can make terrible mistakes; and he would especially have them reflect on their unsatisfied and terrible longings for what is transcendent.

So how are these changes to occur? Mostly, facing the facts, Murray recommends "letting" change happen. It will not occur from the top down. Neither the educational bureaucrats in charge of K-12 education nor the major stakeholders in higher education can be counted on. In both areas, he seems to rely on a return to an educational realism rooted in love—a love of mothers and fathers for their children on the one hand and a love of virtue and wisdom by larger souls on the other—to, little by little, take responsibility for education out of the hyper-democratically beaten path. For example, he counts on the expanding homeschooling movement to evolve into a universe of alternative schools. But for reforms to help the bottom half, Murray does propose a campaign to alter our educational romanticism by making the facts about student achieve-

ment public. It would be interesting to see how far our democracy could really digest the truth about human inequality, even for the sake of greater human happiness and respect.

Still, the most vexing problem, according to Murray, is the reform of our colleges. He seems to count in part on their being undermined at first by facts on the ground, so that they will become hollowed out from within. Many will close. But in the end he relies on some lovely and profound truths that I cannot resist mentioning. First, he says, “the stuff of liberal education is truly wonderful.” Second, prideful professors want to be seen as truly smart. Today’s professor is often only “tricky smart”; someday real smartness will come back into fashion. Third, the questions addressed in a liberal education are questions students ask themselves by nature. And fourth is Aristotle’s truth that our greatest happiness is experienced in the actual exercise of the highest parts of ourselves. Would that everyone who taught in colleges understood these truths in their bones.

*Real Education* is a radical book spoken in soft tones. The old liberal education taught that constitutionalism *was* education in sum and substance. Since free men and women rule themselves individually and collectively, their own souls determine their own human destiny. And since we are born and we die, we ourselves are what we are through education—and we also seek to preserve the best that we are and know through educating those who will take our place. Thus, we pass the serious years of our lives. And so thus, in *Real Education*, Charles Murray proposes nothing less than a new American constitutional order, a postmodern one, in which the indefectible truths about freedom and love and death inform our common life through the souls of our rulers, ourselves.

In this same connection, and finally, Murray should also be praised for restoring priority of place to politics in both lower and higher education. In a sense, all of education is political, even if the highest parts of ourselves transcend politics. Philosophers, after all, were to be kings.