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Sentimental education

by [James Piereson](#)

On *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* by Charles Murray and *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Human Life* by Anthony Kronman.

David Brooks, writing recently in *The New York Times*, made the case that America's rise to world leadership in the twentieth century was driven by a national commitment to education. Levels of education advanced hand-in-hand with America's rise to power. "In 1890," he writes, "the average adult had completed about 8 years of schooling. By 1910 it was 9.6 years and by 1960 it was nearly 14 years." This steady investment in education, stretching over several generations, helped the United States to open up a "gigantic lead" over its European competitors. By 1950, more than 70 percent of American teens were enrolled in secondary schools while in Europe no country exceeded 30 percent.

Mr. Brooks is particularly worried by the fact that by 1970 the era of educational progress (measured by years of schooling) came to an end, allowing other countries to catch up and then to exceed our national levels of educational attainment. Today the United States places well down the list in international rankings in reading and mathematics skills among elementary and secondary school students (twenty-fifth among fifty-seven countries according to the latest rankings).

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed in 2002, was designed to arrest this decline, but it has failed to do so. Mr. Brooks warns that this slide threatens America's position in the world. He urges a new national emphasis on education, particularly for those students at the lowest levels of achievement.

It is true, as Mr. Brooks suggests and as others have said, that the period between 1900 and 2000 was (at least in the United States) "the education century." In 1900, few youngsters continued their education beyond the eighth grade and few localities even provided high schools for their teen-aged populations. At that time, just six out of every hundred young people earned a high school diploma and fewer still attended college. During the first half of the twentieth century, the United States succeeded in providing nearly universal high school education for its youngsters; from 1950 to 2000, the U.S. came close to providing nearly universal collegiate education. Today, more than 80 percent of our students receive a high school diploma and, of this group, more than 70 percent proceed on to college at some level. The international comparisons can be misleading because the economies in Japan and Europe were destroyed by war in the first half of the century which gave the United States an advantage in education (and other fields, too) that it only began to give up in the 1970s.

Mr. Brooks is sounding an alarm of the kind that Americans have heard intermittently throughout the past century—most recently in the cries about failing schools that led to the No Child Left

Behind Act, before that in *The Nation at Risk Report* of 1983 that highlighted the disappointing performance of American students in international comparisons, before that in the crisis of inner city education in the 1960s, and still earlier in the crisis of science education exposed by the launch of the Sputnik space satellite in 1957. In the 1960s experts called for the consolidation of smaller schools into large ones, but in recent years they have called for the break-up of larger schools into smaller units. Earlier there were worries about the education of new immigrants, foreign language teaching in the schools, vocational education for students not headed to college, and the kind of education appropriate for democratic citizenship.

The United States seems always to be in the midst of an educational crisis with our national well-being staked on a resolution. Americans have high expectations for their schools and great faith in what schools can accomplish in all areas of student life. An elaborate industry of education experts, schools of education, research organizations, teachers' unions, parent groups, and politicians now stands ready to highlight new ills and shortcomings in the schools. Reforms usually point in the direction of more testing of students and more money for teachers' salaries, smaller classes, and new classroom buildings. In all cases, especially since the 1960s, there are calls for a stronger commitment to eliminate gaps in achievement between boys and girls, blacks and whites, rich and poor, and the inner city and the suburb. Few of the reforms implemented to date have done much to ameliorate the identified ills—a fact that has done little to introduce a sense of moderation or realism to our debates about education.

Charles Murray takes a far different view of education from David Brooks or, indeed, from most educators and public officials, judging by the themes advanced in his bold and thought-provoking book *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*.^[1] Murray thinks that the nation would be better served if we lowered our expectations about what schools can accomplish and found new ways to train and educate students outside the context of schools, colleges, and formal degree programs. Murray, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, presents an analysis of American education that is every bit as heterodox as the ideas he advanced in his previous works on welfare (*Losing Ground*, 1984), on the interplay between IQ and social structure (*The Bell Curve*, 1994, co-authored with Richard Herrnstein), and on our sprawling welfare state (*In Our Hands: A Plan to Replace the Welfare State*, 2006).

His “four simple truths” are that 1) students vary considerably in ability and aptitude, 2) half the children are below average and are likely to remain so, 3) too many students are going to college, and 4) the nation's future depends on how we educate the gifted. These postulates run strongly against the current of contemporary educational doctrine which holds that all students can be brought up to an average standard, that everyone should go to college, and that policy should focus on the education of disadvantaged and under-achieving students.

Murray's main target is an outlook or ideology that he calls “educational romanticism” (the title of an essay he wrote in these pages last May), which consists in the belief that all children can do well in school if given appropriate opportunities, that there are few limits to achievement, and that lackluster performance is caused by weaknesses in the schools. All children in America, like those in Lake Wobegon, are “above average” according to this view—and thus failures to perform at that level are attributed to the schools. The emphasis in school reform should be on improving the academic performance of the less gifted students. From this standpoint, reform of the schools is the key to improving student performance and to narrowing gaps in achievement. The nearly universal acceptance of this dogma among educators, parents, and politicians is the driving force behind our seemingly endless cycles of educational reform. As each cycle fails or at least does not live up to expectations, we respond by redoubling our efforts to reform the schools.

The federal government, as he points out, has been involved for close to a half century in allocating funds to local schools for the purpose of improving the performance of children from low-income

families—beginning with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and culminating in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Both measures, and others passed in the interim, were predicated on what Murray calls the romantic assumption that schools, properly organized, can raise the achievement levels of these students (as measured by standardized tests). Yet the research conducted on Title I and NCLB fails to show any substantial effects from these expensive interventions. Indeed, even as Brooks suggests, student achievement at all levels flattened out beginning in 1970, notwithstanding the extensive federal investment in education that began just before that time. These disappointing results seem to confirm the earlier conclusions of the now famous Coleman Report (named for James Coleman, the University of Chicago sociologist who led the study) which concluded that family structure, rather than the quality of schools, is the most powerful explanatory factor behind student achievement.

Murray insists that these reforms fail because the assumptions driving them are unrealistic. “Romanticism,” as he uses the term, means something close to “wishful thinking” or the preference for illusion over experience. Murray’s central premise, which he contrasts with romanticism and which follows from his earlier work on IQ, is that children differ widely in ability and aptitude and that, try as they might, schools can do very little to reduce those differences. Murray does not use IQ tests to establish his conclusion about variation in student abilities but relies instead on widely used measures of aptitude and achievement such as those used by the Department of Education. Given the track record of past reforms, he argues that educators would do better by adjusting their curricula to these differences instead of pursuing the dream of eliminating them.

It is to be expected that Murray will be denounced as a pessimist for stressing the limits of school reform and for consigning some students to the bottom of the classroom rankings. Murray, however, is not arguing that school quality and curricula do not matter, but only that they are not effective in closing gaps in aptitude or ability. Thus, while he argues that schools can do little to change the *aptitude* of students, he insists that they can do much to *educate* them in the fundamentals of reading, math, and citizenship. This is an important distinction in terms of the purpose of schools that cuts against the claim that he is a die-hard pessimist or a close-minded realist impervious to the possibilities of change. In his view, the main purpose of the educational system is not to close gaps in achievement or aptitude but to help youngsters move into adulthood “having discovered what they love to do and doing it at the outermost limits of their potential.”

Murray, in fact, favors a broad liberal arts curriculum for students in the lower grades, but he does so for reasons of education and learning and not for the goal of equalizing achievement. School officials would do well, he says, to adopt E. D. Hirsch’s “Core Knowledge” curriculum to provide students with the basic elements of a liberal arts education and also to make them aware of the foundations of our national culture. For those who do not plan to go on to college and who wish to find a job and enter a trade, he urges a new emphasis in the high schools on what used to be called vocational education but is now termed Career and Technical Education.

Murray suggests that the single-minded emphasis on academic achievement shortchanges students who lack the aptitude or the interest to succeed in an advanced academic track.

Murray chides educators for allowing their romantic notions about equality to stand in the way of the rigorous assessment of student abilities that would allow them to adjust curricula and academic standards to those abilities. Making those assessments, however, is difficult to do, as anyone will know who has spent much time around a modern elementary or secondary school. Parents are notoriously reluctant to accept the assessment of their child as just “average,” as most students will be. It is often easier for teachers and administrators to follow the path of least resistance by avoiding assessments altogether. Some schools have gone so far in this direction as to eliminate class rankings (to avoid hurt feelings for those not on top) and even to dispense with grades—both of which are expressions of the soft-headed pedagogy that Murray rightly criticizes. Murray is wrong,

however, to suggest that such romanticism pervades the schools and colleges, for there is one visible area of education where instructors disdain excuses and hurt feelings and constantly make unsentimental judgments of student ability—that is, in the area of scholastic and intercollegiate athletics.

The idea that everyone, or nearly everyone, should attend college is a fairly new one, originating in the 1950s and then gaining irresistible momentum in the 1960s. As late as 1957, James B. Conant, a past president of Harvard University, estimated that only about 15 percent of high school students possessed the aptitude to perform college level work. Yet today the overwhelming majority of students who finish high school are encouraged by counselors, teachers, and parents to proceed on to college—even though many drop out, fall behind in their studies, and fail to earn degrees. Murray agrees with Conant, estimating on the basis of his own analysis of college level readings that just 10 percent, and at most 20 percent, of high school graduates are capable of the complex writings that are at the core of college-level work. Most students in his view are wasting their time in college when they would prefer, or would be better off, spending the years between 18 and 22 in the world of work.

The cause of this is the “tyranny of the B.A.”—or the assumption that in order to win a good job a youngster has to have a college degree. Employers use the B.A. as a sign not that a potential employee has been prepared for a particular job, but rather that he has the intelligence and self-discipline to complete a four-year course of study. Employers use the college degree as a signal because they lack other information to gauge employability. In a setting in which nearly everyone has a degree, not to have one is taken as a sign of laziness or lack of intelligence. It may in fact mean nothing more than that a person lacks *academic* ability or motivation.

It would make much more sense, Murray says, to create certification tests of the kind already used for accountants for entrance into various trades and professions like journalism, social work, engineering, business, nursing, or computer programming. Employers could use the results of such tests to assess candidates in place of the B.A. This, he surmises, would undermine the B.A. as a certification for employment and with it the assumption that everyone should go to college. The numerous community colleges and four-year universities that now exist to meet the artificial demand for the B.A. might continue to function as vocational institutions that prepare students to pass certification exams in their chosen fields.

All this is controversial enough, but Murray goes on to argue that the fortunes of the nation lie in the hands of the most gifted youngsters—those among the top 10 percent in aptitude and ability who will run the country a generation hence. This he states as a fact rather than as a value: leadership in a complex society will inevitably fall into the hands of those who are facile with language and are capable of understanding and expressing complex arguments. These students are spread out across every town and village across the country; by far the greatest proportion of them attend large public universities rather than Ivy League institutions—though the students attending these institutions will be members as well.

Murray thinks that our system shortchanges these students, too, by failing to challenge them with rigorous courses, leaving them “sloppy in verbal expression, unschooled in the tools they will need to make good decisions, innocent about any systematic thought about the meaning of human life, oblivious to all of these shortcomings in their education, and oblivious to their own intellectual limits.” The loose requirements and trendy courses prevalent on most campuses are leaving students unprepared for the responsibilities they will inherit. Students are encouraged to be nice and happy when in fact they should be provoked into deeper thought through the study of great literature. Murray endorses the case for the liberal arts advanced recently by Anthony Kronman in his book, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Human Life*.^[2] For Kronman, as for Murray, the study of the humanities and the great books is indispensable

to the broad understanding of the human condition. This more than anything else is what gifted students require from their colleges and universities.

Though Murray is likely to be attacked as a conservative, it appears in fact that he has picked up some of the threads of the older progressive education that were left scattered when that movement lost its momentum in the 1950s and 1960s and broke apart into various factions and schools of thought. Assessment of student abilities by testing, tracking of students by aptitude, creation of vocational and college preparatory curricula for students of different ability—these were some of the key innovations introduced by progressives into American education in the 1920s.

Some progressive educators sought to create a “science of education” with intelligence testing as one of its empirical pillars. Influential critics, among them prominent liberals like Walter Lippmann who were otherwise sympathetic to progressive ideas, blasted the reformers for using tests as an excuse to accept differences in achievement instead of deploying the schools to overcome them. Progressives, in turn, dismissed such critics as “romantics” or “sentimentalists.” This debate, which took place in the 1920s and 1930s, reflected an ongoing tension within progressivism between science and equality—between the requirements of assessment and concerns about equal treatment for all—which over a period of decades was resolved in the direction of equality and eventually into the ideology of romanticism that is the target of Murray’s book.

It is, of course, true that the educational romanticism that Murray exposes was created and put into place by the cognitive elite to whom it has done the greatest harm. It (almost) goes without saying that such victims of educational romanticism will also be the most stringent critics of Murray’s analysis and proposals. Unfair to the poor! Insensitive to women and minorities! You can already hear the sorts of criticisms that will be directed at this book. The man-in-the-street who has never set foot onto a college campus is more likely to be sympathetic to Murray’s argument than the college presidents, deans, and professors who shape educational thought.

Nevertheless, by directing his argument toward the people least likely to be sympathetic to it, Charles Murray has once again demonstrated two of the greatest advantages of successful education: independence of thought and the courage to articulate unpopular opinions in the service of truth.

Notes

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1. *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America’s Schools Back to Reality* by Charles Murray; Crown Forum, 224 pages, \$24.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Human Life* by Anthony Kronman; Yale University Press, 320 pages, \$17. [Go back to the text.](#)

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