

***Reforming Citizenship Education:
Using the Ideas of the Founding Fathers
in the Modern American World of Education***

Public debate over the state of public education is nothing new to American. While many Americans often consider today's debate to be the most important the country has ever had in its history, we can usually find examples from our past that can help us find meaning in today's debates. Today, Americans debate over the merits of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind), private school vouchers, charter schools, teacher education and many others. It would come as a surprise to many Americans that the Founding Fathers had similar debates over the need and purpose of education. It is through an examination of this debate that we might be able to find some answers about the current round of debates over public education.

The biggest debate in public education today concerns No Child Left Behind. The legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002 requires schools to graduate students with adequate literacy and numeracy skills to survive in the highly competitive workplace. This outcomes-based policy measures a school district's progress toward the goal of having every graduate proficient in these subjects through a series of state and national testing programs (United States Department of Education, 2006). In many ways, this bill has become the center of public education debate within the nation. However, this program is not new in the debate over education.

At the birth of the American republic, Benjamin Franklin proposed an outcome-based curriculum that emphasized literacy and numeracy skills (Pangle & Pangle, 2000). Franklin argued that students needed to develop math and science skills in order to learn how the world operates. According to Franklin, this develops a creativity in students that

allows them to see the possibilities in an ever-changing world. To this end, there is very little difference between the ideas of public education in the early days of the republic and those ideas of the modern nation. The founding fathers also saw the need to have an outcomes-based education. Education had to serve a purpose and stick to that purpose. Again, there is very little difference in the purpose of education from the Founding Fathers to the principles underlying No Child Left Behind. Unfortunately, the similarities end here.

The goals for literacy in the No Child Left Behind demand only that students be able to read at their current grade level's expectations (United States Department of Education, 2006). For the Founding Fathers, however, citizenship and character were the desired outcomes of literacy education (Pangle & Pangle, 2000 and McClellan 1999). The education of students at the beginning of the American republic had to develop adults that were able to take part in a government based on the consent of the governed. The education, according to James Wilson, had to emphasize how to be a free citizen and guarantee freedom's future (Pangle & Pangle, 2000). Thomas Jefferson developed six outcomes of elementary education that were important to develop a citizenry that would guarantee the future of the republic. Several of these outcomes focused specifically on the literacy function of education. Literacy education, according to Jefferson, should focus on improving a student's morals and faculties through reading, developing knowledge of the rights the student has in the republic, understanding the duty to serve the community and the country and communicating his ideas through writing (Pangle & Pangle, 2000).

If Jefferson specifically developed the purpose of literacy education, Franklin

went even deeper. Franklin developed an educational model that focused heavily on expository writing, public oratory and debate, letter writing, newspaper and journal reading, current political issues discussion, journalistic reporting and historical reading and reporting (Pangle & Pangle, 2000). From this type of education, students would graduate from school able to meet the demands of a young government that placed enormous responsibility on its citizens for its future. The most basic need, one of which the Founding Fathers believed critical to maintaining freedom from government abuse, was to have citizens able to serve as jury members. According to Franklin, and other Founding Fathers, this required higher-level reasoning skills with a deep knowledge of politics, morality and logical argument construction (Pangle & Pangle, 2000).

This educational model remained a major driving force in national educational policy for the next 150 years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, John Dewey continued to emphasize the need for citizenship and character education. Applying the model of the Founding Fathers, Dewey developed ideas on how to keep this purpose pure at a time when the country began to implement compulsory school attendance (Dewey, 1916/1996). However, in the last fifty years, America has moved away from emphasizing character and citizenship skills in its school, instead focusing heavily on science and math skills while emphasizing students only need to be able to read and write (McClellan, 1999). Because of this, the modern world desperately needs to return to the words of its Founding Fathers and their supporters like John Dewey in order to secure the future of the republic.

Despite their wisdom, some critics unfairly attempt to discredit their ideas as outdated and irrelevant to the modern world. There is a widespread belief in the myth

that the society of the Founding Fathers was mostly a homogenous population that has very little to offer the modern American republic with its very diverse population (Kurlansky, 2006). This argument could not be further from the truth about the times of the Founding Fathers. Although it was true that white men of European descent dominated the early American Republic, it was not a very homogenous society when it came to religion, politics and economic activity (Perkins, 1988 and Simmons, 1976). During the War for Independence, the southern colonies had strong loyalty to King George III and were extremely slow to support the more revolutionary minded middle and northern colonies. Subsistence agriculture dominated the south, but commercial agriculture dominated the middle colonies while business became the economy of the northern colonies. This economic diversity remained in place well after the birth of the republic. Nowhere in the world did religion dictate the daily actions of people than it did in the northern colonies, which remained true when they became northern states (Perkins, 1988 and Simmons, 1976).

The Articles of Confederation, the first American constitution, did not attempt to unify this diversity. Instead, each State continued to act in its own self-interest and retained the power to prevent any attempts at unifying this diversity after the Americans won their independence from Great Britain in 1783. It was only after the economic crisis during the middle of the 1780s did the nation attempt to come together to create a more unified nation. However, it was still not easy. Rhode Island did not send delegates to the meeting in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 that wrote the constitution that governs the nation today. In addition, the men in Philadelphia had to compromise over issues concerning small state interests versus large states interests, business interests

versus agricultural interests and central government versus state government sovereignty (Kelly, Harbison & Belz, 1991). Within this diversity, the Founding Fathers created a successful government that put an emphasis on its preservation to the citizenry of the various states. Therefore, the ideas of the Founding Fathers remain relevant in today's diverse American republic, since the preservation of the nation remains the responsibility of the citizenry of the various states.

Another reason some people say that we should not follow the advice on education the Founding Fathers gave us is that the world that we live in today is too different from their world. While this statement is true, it is not a reason to dismiss their ideas. In fact, the educational world in which the Founding Fathers lived might have been more difficult to deal with than our world today. For example, the citizens of the early republic had no idea what it meant to be an American. When the Constitution of 1789 went into effect, all of those subject to the new government system had been American citizens, or citizens of their State, for six years. Not only did the Founding Fathers see their mission for education as preparing a citizenry for self-government, but also they had to create a citizenry that identified with their new nation and the ideas of self-government (Pangle and Pangle, 2000). For modern America, this is not an issue. An overwhelming number of Americans support the ideas of democratic/republican government. In addition, Americans have enjoyed a mostly successful tradition of self-government since 1789. For modern education, we do not have to convince a skeptical public about the value of self-government as the Founding Fathers did.

Another issue the creators of the American Republic had to deal with was the lack of communication. It would be hard to imagine a new constitution written today that

would take from September 1787 to June 1788 to ratify. Of course, we would not have had the publication of the *Federalist Papers* in the passing time, but instant communication was not available to the Founding Fathers. What they were able to do, during the passing time, however, is shape the way the debate occurred in the various states as ratification votes took place. Instead of allowing the naysayer to dominate the ratification debate, John Jay, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison used the *Federalist Papers* to force the opposition to argue from a negative point-of-view, which meant those opposing the Constitution had to argue from the more difficult “why not” position (Kelly, Harbison & Belz, 1991). Today, we know about things occurring not only in our own country, but also around the world, in a matter of seconds. Unfortunately, this can make the ability to shape the tone and imagery created by the news more difficult.

While some would argue this is a handicap to the citizenship education issue, it is not. Editor-in-Chief of *U.S. News & World Report* Mortimer Zuckerman (2006) wrote in a recent column that the modern communication, especially television, has caused the military to have to adopt a strategy of communication. While this was not an issue for the military until the most recent past, the modern media now communicated the tragedies of war in a matter of seconds with an emotional imagery both in word and picture. However, Zuckerman believes the military can adapt and has to adapt. By allowing for the release of news and images of the good things brought by American military intervention in Iraq, the military can develop public support for the long-term goals of the American government in Iraq.

This strategy can easily transfer to citizenship education. The Founding Fathers could not take advantage of an “instant news” national media as they attempted to create

a national citizenry for self-government. Educators today have that advantage. Instead of allowing the news media to publicize constantly the ills of American education, educators must adopt a strategy of emphasizing the positive so that the discussion concerning citizenship education develops a positive tone, which allows for the positive development of new ideas. The late-night talk shows love to point out how much Americans do not know about basic American historical and governmental facts. However, many Americans do know these facts, but we never hear from them. When educators allow the news media to create a negative view of education, the nation discusses educational policy from the same negative viewpoint. Only by creating a positive climate can the discussion create positive ideas about reforming education and making something good to something great.

The Founding Fathers would have never allowed Great Britain to set the educational policy goals for the young republic. Franklin believed that good citizenship educators taught from the historical perspective that monarchy is bad and self-government is good. This laid the groundwork that created a nation that supports self-government. We no longer have to worry about that. Instead, a simple tweak of the current literacy goals for students would put America back on-track to developing the citizens the Founding Fathers envisioned for the nation. However, in order to improve the American tradition of self-government, educators must take over the talk about how to do this. When educators allow the media to dictate the national mood on education, negative feelings are sure to follow. Only by shaping the national debate about educational policy toward a more positive tone can the nation reform its education in a way that will preserve and enhance the American republic. The Founding Fathers

understood this. So should we.

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