



U.S. Students Ignorant of History; Will Repeat Mistakes of Past

Once again, a study has show that American students are woefully ignorant of history. Test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate, writes the Wall Street Journal, that only “20% of U.S. fourth-graders and 17% of eighth-graders who took the 2010 history exam were ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’...” and only 12 percent of 12th-graders were so. In fact, their knowledge is so lacking that fewer than “a quarter of American 12th-graders knew China was North Korea’s ally during the Korean War, and only 35% of fourth-graders knew the purpose of the Declaration of Independence,” the paper continued.



Other studies have shown similarly stunning results. In 2008, the *New York Times* wrote about how fewer than “half of American teenagers...knew when the Civil War was fought, and one-quarter thought that Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World sometime after 1750, not in 1492.” The *Times* also reported that “[a]bout a quarter of the teenagers surveyed were unable to correctly identify Adolf Hitler as Germany’s chancellor during World War II, instead identifying him variously as a munitions maker, an Austrian premier and the German Kaiser.”

Now, of course, this educational dysfunction inspires many to sound the alarm about America’s decline. And we hear many proposed solutions. Unfortunately, though, the typical ones will do nothing to right the ship.

Let’s first explore what the problem is not. Teachers unions, activists, and politicians often claim that the remedy is more funding, smaller class sizes, greater technology, and newer buildings. But does this make sense? Education was far better 60 (or more) years ago — a 1947 high-school diploma was the equivalent of today’s college degree — during a time of low technology; less funding, even in inflation-adjusted dollars; and sometimes very large class sizes. As for experienced brick and mortar, anyone who has shopped around for an apartment in New York knows that a building’s status as “*pre-war*” (and, no, kids, WWII wasn’t fought in the ‘80s and started by Reagan) is a selling point. Thus, it appears that the above prescriptions are akin to diversionary tactics: People put forth faux solutions to distract themselves from the real issues — which they don’t want to confront. And it has the added benefit of making them *feel* as if they’re doing *something*.

So what are the real issues? First, the permissive, undisciplined environment prevailing in most schools makes good education impossible. And this gets at a simple, universally-missed point: Discipline and obedience are prerequisites for learning. Why? Well, *how can someone learn from you if he isn’t first willing to listen to you?* Memorize this last sentence, by the way; it’s something we should make a mantra.



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on June 16, 2011

But while instilling obedience wouldn't be difficult, the methods necessary are so politically incorrect that few will contemplate them. It requires punishment — sometimes corporal — harsh enough to deter offenders. And it requires that we place incorrigibles in military-style schools so that they cannot poison the well for all. As it stands currently, however, teachers have to spend so much time on “crowd control” and coaxing kids into cooperating that little time is left for actual learning.

What is left is often squandered on the wrong things. And it isn't just recent abominations such as “transgender” training in grade school. Many years ago already, I asked a group of young, upper-class children I worked with who the father of our nation was.

Not one of them answered George Washington.

A response I did get, however, was “Martin Luther King.”

This anecdote jibes with statistics. While students are strikingly ignorant about our nation's founding, the study the *Times* cited found that 97 percent of teens knew that Rev. King was the man who said “I have a dream”; it also found that 80 percent knew that the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* concerns a community conflict sparked by a lawyer's legal defense of a black man. So I guess we can rule out an epidemic of Alzheimer's among adolescents. After all, the racial-grievance curriculum relentlessly pounded into their heads has obviously stuck.

And the feminist agenda figures prominently, too. A woman I know was discussing academics with a 12-year-old girl babysitter, and the mention of male historical figures caused the girl to exclaim, “I didn't know there were men in history!” This is the result of compiling textbooks based on quota, where women of little or dubious accomplishment are showcased while men such as the Founding Fathers are de-emphasized.

Of course, even someone who supports using affirmative action to eliminate diversity and make every field (or at least arenas in which politically favored groups lag behind; the NBA need not worry) *identical* in terms of group representation should understand that we mustn't teach history based on quota. “Should,” I say — but won't necessarily. For there are social engineers among us who adhere to the Orwellian *1984* principle, “He who controls the past controls the present; he who controls the present controls the future.” And insofar as their more innocent — but still misguided — motivations go, here is their thinking: If we can, for instance, convince girls that women have always done what men do in the past, they'll be more likely to pursue traditionally male endeavors in the future.

Whatever the agenda, however, there are always consequences for subordinating the truth to it. For what is history's true value? It lies, to expand on George Santayana's famous saying about forgetting and repeating past mistakes, in the fact that it is the record of man's social experiments. Now, when the matter is science, we all understand that it could not have advanced if we hadn't kept accurate record of experiments in the field; they informed about what worked and what didn't so that we'd know what not to repeat and what to build upon. And it's no different with history's social experiments. Thus, is it surprising that while almost three-quarters of senior citizens view socialism negatively, the young have *as positive a view* of it as they do of “capitalism”? The social experiments in question have been recorded with the due diligence of a University of East Anglia climate researcher.

If the problems in modern education really were a lack of money and technology, the remedy would be simple. Unfortunately, the real issues — the lack of discipline and obedience and the presence of destructive agendas within schools — are the result of a deep cultural malaise that few will address. Until and unless we do, however, all our efforts to improve education will be an utter waste of time.



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