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The Therapeutic Classroom

Thus far, much of the discussion in this book has been about the decline of academic standards. But that is putting the cart before the horse, since a dumbing down of academics presumes that our schools are at least focusing on academics. What is especially distressing today is the threatened disappearance of academics altogether. I don't believe the disclaimers one hears from the educational establishment that schools have a renewed commitment to the academic mission. There is too much evidence to the contrary.

There has always been the temptation to use schools for purposes other than schooling, for proselytizing or other ends, since children are the ultimate captive audience. The history of American education is littered with examples of K-12 educators of various stripes, progressive and otherwise, succumbing to the temptation. Michael Kirst, commenting on nineteenth century schools, notes that "the *McGuffey Readers*, first published in 1836,...were frankly moralistic [preaching the Protestant ethic in stressing honesty and industry as the leading values].... Courses in bookkeeping, surveying, industrial drawing, and commercial skills, at first taught in proprietary schools [private vocational schools], moved into the public schools in the decades from 1845 to 1865.... Henry Barnard, a nineteenth century leader of education, believed...that the school should inculcate positive rules of healthful living, among these the dangers of tobacco and liquor. Catharine Beecher [another leader] urged that the school teach the importance of fresh air, loose clothing, simple diet, and exercise." By 1890, there was sufficient concern over the seeming drift and lack of focus in the mission of public schools that the National Education Association created the Committee of Ten chaired by Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, which urged a rigorous academic curriculum for high school students as preparation for college. In her lengthy critique of progressivism's preoccupation with nonacademic concerns throughout the twentieth century, Diane Ravitch starts with the progressives' rejection of the Committee of Ten's recommendations as a premonition of what was to follow.

Ravitch devotes considerable space to a leading critic of progressive education and a kindred spirit of the Committee of Ten—Robert Hutchins, the boy-wonder of the University of Chicago who became president of that institution in 1929 at the age of thirty. At the same moment as the Great Depression was descending upon America and as educators in the Teacher's College of Columbia University were advocating using K-12 classrooms for vocational training and social engineering to cure the problems of industrial society, Hutchins reaffirmed the importance of intellectual pursuits and the role of academics as the core function of schools:

> Hutchins disapproved of the objectives of progressive education. It was wrong, he asserted, to "adjust" students to their environment.... Nor did he approve of preparing youngsters for a collectivist social order. No one, he noted, could say with any certainty what the social order of the future should be, and it was mere conceit to design a course of study based on one's own political and economic opinions. Nor did he agree that the shaping of personality or character should be the object of education. . . . Character, he said,...was a by-product of "hard work well done." Worse, the resources that ought to go into intellectual training would be "lavished on athletics, social life, and student guidance, a kind of coddling, nursing, and pampering of students that is quite unknown anywhere in the world." Hutchins insisted that the object of general education should be "the training of the mind."...Only the school and college could supply intellectual discipline, and if they abandoned this responsibility, no other agency would do it.

Over time we have moved further and further away from the Hutchins ideal. By 1950, when "life adjustment" curricula abounded in many American schools, the Harvard scholar David Riesman was observing that "teachers were now being told to pay more attention to their students' social and psychological development than to their intellectual prowess." What was observable in 1950 has only become more prevalent since, fed by the radical libertarian and radical egalitarian cultural aftershocks of the 1960s.

The pampering and nursing Hutchins worried about has reached new highs in the growth of the self-esteem movement and the conversion of schools into mini-hospitals, as school boards spend as much time debating mental health delivery services as they do the delivery of academics. The shaping of personality and character is now formally enshrined in the curriculum in the form of anger management/violence prevention programs and character education. Social engineering is provided through cooperative learning and multiculturalism/diversity sensitivity training as well as coerced volunteerism (service learning). Vocational education has morphed into school-to-work programs. And more energies are now devoted in many schools to improving school "climate" through enhancing participation in sports and other extracurricular activities than are devoted to strengthening academic coursework. The title of a recent *American School Board Journal* article, echoing Hutchins' concerns, sums up the problem posed by recent trends: "Nurturing the Life of the Mind: If Schools Don't Value Intellect, Who Will?"

Current K-12 educational research and practice is being driven primarily by a clear set of biases in support of the psychological well-being of the child and the social harmony of the classroom, school, and community rather than by the search for academic excellence. Teachers increasingly play the role of psychologists and sociologists, for which they are untrained. When our schools are not engaged in personal self-esteem-building, hormonal development, and other extracurricular matters, they are so preoccupied with promoting an ideological agenda that includes equity, diversity, multiculturalism, gender-neutral instruction, abilities awareness, inclusion, and assorted other commitments that it is remarkable they have any time left over for what used to be defined as education. We have been so busy turning our schools into social science laboratories, social work agencies, churches, psychiatry wards, wellness clinics, parenting surrogates, and daycare centers that we have completely lost sight of what is uniquely their mission—giving students a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding, a love of learning, and the tools for pursuing that learning.

Commenting on the increasingly overcrowded school day, a veteran teacher told me "we are trying to pour 60 gallons of education into a 10 gallon hat. It can't be done." Yet we continue to delude ourselves into thinking we can keep adding to the hats teachers wear. Typical is the following statement calling for "an inclusive system for the education of *all* children" published by the National Association of State Boards of Education: "[There is a] need for education that encompasses the many facets of the 'whole' child. That is,...his or her schooling must encompass a holistic view that is attuned to the student's non-academic needs. Incorporated within this model...[are] at least three spheres of development: (1) the academic...; (2) the social and emotional...; and (3) personal and collective responsibility and citizenship." Note there is no hierarchy of functions, just a mandate to do it all. Actually, this is a fairly tame statement compared to many other such pronouncements one hears today that even more blaringly trumpet the importance of the nonacademic over the academic mission.

Who is responsible for the added burdens being placed on our schools? There are many sources of the problem. First, there are those liberal-minded progressives, concentrated especially in schools of education, who see the schools as agents for saving the planet. This includes getting students to develop greater empathy for the oppressed, for the less fortunate, for the spotted owl and snail darter, and for various other victims of an often harsh world. Rita Kramer, after observing school of education classrooms over a substantial period of time, concluded:

> Everywhere, I found idealistic people eager to do good. And everywhere, I found them being told that the way to do good was to prepare themselves to cure a sick society. To become therapists, as it were, specializing in the pathology of education. Almost nowhere did I find teachers of teachers whose emphasis was on the measurable learning of real knowledge....The school is to be remade into a republic of feelings—as distinct from a republic of learning—where everyone can feel he deserves an A. In order to create a more just society, future teachers are being told they must focus on the handicapped of all kinds—those who have the greatest difficulties in learning, whether because of physical problems or emotional ones, congenital conditions or those caused by lack of stimulation in the family...—in order to have everyone come out equal in the end.

Self-esteem-building and community-building are seen here as part of the same project, not so much a dumbing down as a substitute for academics. Although schools often complain about being saddled with too many peripheral demands that reduce time on task, the fact is that they often invite their expanded mission, possibly because it can be more exhilarating to engage in the atmospherics of transforming individual lives and society at large than getting one's hands dirty in the nitty-gritty of diagramming sentences or teaching multiplication tables. It can also be easier to cover up incompetence, when the main competency teachers are supposed to demonstrate is being a nice person and getting their students to be nice people, as opposed to becoming more intellectually competent. While many serious teachers resent the nonacademic expectations imposed on them, the less able view these as welcome distractions.

The touchy-feelies and social engineers on the left are not solely to blame for the movement away from academics. The bottom-line business sector along with the family-values folks on the right bear some responsibility as well. Conservative corporate interests are often behind school-to-work programs, while conservative religious groups support character education programs, both of which can consume substantial parts of the school day no less than sensitivity training and can be just as anti-intellectual. Although the advocates for these programs argue that they are needed to impart firmer values than our schools are now producing, their rationale seems as flimsy as that invoked by the more mushy-headed progressives.

Parents themselves are part of the problem. With so many households now dependent on two wage-earners, many parents have been derelict in assuming responsibility for tending to their children's emotional needs and character building and instead have looked to the schools to help perform this function. Although the many bipartisan "Public Agenda" surveys reported in recent years show parents much more focused on academics, especially on a back-to-basics agenda, than are education professors and teachers, parents often send schools a mixed message. In one survey, for example, done by John Goodlad, it was found that only about half of all parents interviewed selected "intellectual" development as the single most preferred goal of schooling, with the other half supporting personal, social or vocational development as a higher priority.

Both liberals and conservatives are guilty today of deprecating academics. But it is the progressives who must bear primary responsibility. They are in charge of the national educational bureaucracies as well as most local school systems that are now trying to juggle independent and cooperative learning and other conflicting ideas. In fact, although ideas such as cooperative learning are being heralded as cutting-edge pedagogy, they are better understood as repackaged nostrums having a long pedigree in the history of American education going at least as far back as Dewey. What *is* new and different today is that *all* students, from the most able and well-adjusted to the least, are to be subjected to the *same* regimen in the modern therapeutic classroom under the watchful eye of a teacher/facilitator whose job it is to insure that all kids end up in the same place in terms of attitudes if not academics, "discovering" those values and beliefs which are mandated from on high. Today's therapeutic classroom might be best described as "manipulated empowerment."

Cissy Lacks, the Tale of the Tape, and Other Recollections

Our schools have become "empowerment zones." If one did a content analysis of speeches made at professional development meetings, the word "empowerment" would probably pop up as the most frequently uttered. Educational reformers have essentially given up on producing an informed, knowledgeable citizenry. Instead, what counts the most is "empowering" students to construct their own meanings out of life and to express their personal opinions and feelings. The Oprahization of American education is actually far from spontaneous, however. It is fairly tightly scripted, with some opinions (the politically correct ones) being tolerated more than others. I have seen manipulated empowerment at work first-hand, as schools embarked on the contradictory quest, with my kids and others, to liberate and indoctrinate at the same time.

The St. Louis-area school district of Ferguson-Florissant found itself embroiled in an "empowerment" controversy relating to both students and teachers in which I became indirectly involved. It concerned one Cecilia (Cissy) Lacks, a white English teacher at the predominantly black Berkeley High School, who was fired in 1995 for permitting her students to use profanity in a creative writing assignment. She took her case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately rejected her argument that the school district's policy regarding acceptable classroom language was unclear. Although the legal issues centered on the technicalities of the circumstances under which she was fired—she claimed not only that the policy was unclear but that there was racial discrimination on the part of a black principal toward a white staff member—the larger issues involved free speech and academic freedom. Lacks used the empowerment defense, defending her teaching techniques as "student centered and designed to unleash students' creativity." This position—that students should be given carte blanche to express themselves any way they wanted while teachers should be given carte blanche to promote such expression—was supported by the National Education Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the PEN American Center (a writers' association led by the actor Paul Newman and others who protect First Amendment rights and who eventually awarded her a medal for her efforts).

What exactly was it that Lacks and her supporters were defending? I cannot fully describe here the nature of her teaching technique since many of the words she approved of fifteen-year-olds using are not fit to print even for adults. She had her students, who were mostly black, write and perform plays that contained assorted obscenities, including multiple uses of the f-word, and violent physical action. She videotaped the plays for all to see, although she probably did not anticipate that parents and Supreme Court judges would view them. It was not just a case of allowing the language; the teacher also appeared to be signaling to the students that she encouraged their "authentic" voice and that she did not want them to hold back anything. (It is a testimony to how lewd the language was that the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ran an editorial supporting Lacks but could not publish the actual contents of student writing for fear of offending its readers.)

I wrote a memo to some members of the Clayton school board who I knew were "child-centered" types and who I suspected were closet Lacks supporters, in which I used the f-word and said "lest I offend you, I feel free to use this language here since it has the blessing of the NEA, which has helped pay for Lacks' legal fees, and if it is OK for fifteen-year-olds to use such 'voice,' why can't I?" I told the board I was not making the case for preventing students from reading *Huckleberry Finn* and other literary works that contain colorful language, only not actively eliciting and condoning such language from them. I was not advocating prudishness, only prudence, not censorship but censureship of mindless vulgarities. I got no response, as usual.

The Lacks case smacked of political correctness. A hidden agenda that seemed to be at work was the need to respect diversity, in this instance the presumed native dialect of the "hood." In turning her classroom into a Snoop Doggy Dogg jam session, Lacks seemed to be engaging in the most banal sort of "situational learning." No matter how well-intentioned, she was patronizing black children and insulting black parents, who, like all parents, presumed that school was the place where kids learned to move beyond the confines of their circumstances to become more educated individuals. Such a display of "language arts" would never have been contemplated in a private or parochial school, which is precisely why such schools are becoming increasingly attractive to black parents. Although some parents of Berkeley High students supported Lacks, most were understandably infuriated at a white teacher trying to "cure" black students of their pathological behavior with a misguided dose of multiculturalism.

Around the same time that the *Post-Dispatch* was printing a pro-Lacks editorial, the newspaper also published my op-ed piece in which I suggested that Lacks was essentially applying the model of the therapeutic classroom that had become widely accepted among progressive educators, even if she had perhaps taken it to such an extreme that most progressive educators in town, though no doubt sympathetic to her, could not publicly defend her. I noted that her methods were a logical extension of contemporary progressive thinking:

> It is not so much Cissy Lacks who has been on trial in this case as the entire public school reform movement she is a creature of.... Almost anything goes.... [This approach] has become a pervasive part of educational practice even in rich suburban districts.... In the worst sort of way, we are pandering to the MTV generation when we constantly encourage students to speak from "their" experience, to tell us "their" stories, to use "their" language (or if they cannot write, to draw or act out or use any other means "they" are comfortable with) and to approach all of education from where—in Lacks' words—"they are at."

I received a mixed bag of responses, including some rather scathing letters from some of my ACLU friends and some more supportive letters from parents, such as one who wrote that "I think most people with school-aged children would find Cissy Lacks' methods of teaching offensive and self-defeating. I know I do, and if my children were in such a class, I would have them removed pronto. Most people I know with children in public schools are moderates with a lot of good, common sense. Unfortunately, some of the people running our schools and some of the people teaching in our schools have the common sense God gave a goose." I also received a nice call from Easy Ed McCauley, the St. Louis Hawks basketball star of the 1950s and now a local radio personality, whose station cited me for a "best commentary" that month.

When I said in my op-ed piece that even rich suburban school districts had adopted an "anything goes" view of education, I meant that these districts were often among those most wedded to a "situational learning" pedagogy that was an offshoot of the progressive child-centered philosophy focused on where students "are at." Although our own Clayton school district certainly could claim to be teaching some high-powered academics, such as advanced calculus and AP history courses, and could point to "teaching and learning" as the first principles that appeared in its districtwide curriculum development plan, I saw nonacademic stuff increasingly creeping into the curriculum. For example, a news release issued in November 2000 entitled "Educating the Whole Child" stated that "developing a student's mind is no longer the sole focus of education. We look to educate the total student. That is, educating both a student's mind and a student's body. This approach promotes development of the 'whole' person and helps establish life-long habits of learning and wellness." If all that was being alluded to here was the normal role of the school in supplementing schoolwork with physical education, there would be little to complain about. Not only, however, was Clayton elevating the body to the same status as the mind as the subject of schooling; it was also dedicating itself to servicing the psyche, the soul, the heart, and all other parts of the human anatomy.

In February of 2001, the Clayton Language Literacy Committee submitted its five-year report to the Citizens Curriculum Council, a parents group that had been formed to provide added input to the school board and administration. The committee continued to embrace trendy "whole language" as an approach to reading despite mounting evidence against that approach. And also, on its very first page, the report stated, "We felt it was time to eliminate the long term, homogeneous grouping of children for instruction and move to more flexible grouping strategies that better met individual needs and *preserved children's self-esteem as* *learners* [italics mine]." Here was as explicit a statement as one could imagine calling for building the entire language arts curriculum, including a ban on ability-grouping, around the fear of damaging somebody's self-esteem. If one reads between the lines, what was at work here was the desire to serve not only "individual needs" of students but also the needs of staff and administrators who did not want to make the hard decisions of who were "bluebirds" as opposed to "redbirds," something that could threaten what they define as school harmony and the development of "community."

The twin goals of self-esteem-building and community-building in fact have been a constant theme in the Clayton school district in recent years. I distinctly recall a flyer that went out to parents in 1994 announcing the appearance at a Clayton High all-school assembly of Mark Scharenbroich, "a nationally recognized motivational speaker" whose "style combines the art of a stand-up comic with...issues of respect for self and others." My immediate reaction was one of stupefaction, wondering how it was that, even though parents such as me were being told that schools simply did not have time to teach multiplication tables and other basics, we apparently did have time to bring in a combination Rosie O'Donnell and Jerry Seinfeld. Mr. Scharenbroich might well have been a good speaker, but I would rather supply jokes and pep-talks to my kids myself after hours. If the kids' self-esteem needed to be pumped up, it could be done through programs like the one started by a former Clayton High principal named Al Burr, who initiated an annual "trump card" award given to the student who showed the most progress academically in the face of obstacles that had to be overcome.

It is a toss-up what is more important in K-12 schools today—self-esteem or cooperative learning. Cooperation and collaboration is everywhere in the air. It makes for a difficult target of criticism, since one does not wish to be seen as promoting Social Darwinism, especially among kindergarteners. Indeed, cooperative learning has much to commend it, if it were balanced by an equally healthy respect for the virtues of competition. But "competition" is not a favored word in today's curriculum materials. Nowhere is the mantra of cooperative learning more in evidence than in the case of the multiage classroom, which is the latest rage in America's elementary schools and which two Clayton schools have implemented. Clayton describes the multiage classroom as "a learning-centered heterogeneous classroom which contains children of varying ages who remain together for two or more years." The idea is to mix kids of different ages together in, say, a combined first grade-second grade class, on the assumption that the younger students will learn from the older students by utilizing them as role models while the older students will deepen their own learning by mentoring the younger ones. The people who invented this practice apparently forgot that we once had one-room schoolhouses which were abandoned for various reasons, one of which was that they did not work as well as having age-specific, grade-specific classrooms. They also apparently have not questioned the propriety of having seven-year-olds serve as appropriate "elder" role models for six-year-olds or expecting those same seven-year-olds to tend to their own learning at the same time that they are being pressed into service as free labor to help the $50,000 a year professional teach classmates who need help.

Although proponents of the multiage classroom offer various arguments to justify this innovation, it is clear that nonacademic concerns are at least as important to them as academic ones. Clayton's own Multiage Curriculum Study Group issued a report in 1997, stating that "children in multiage classrooms do better than their peers in traditionally grouped classrooms on measures of self-esteem and social development; [they] exhibit less aggressive and competitive behavior than children in traditionally grouped classrooms; [they] exhibit more altruistic and nurturing behavior." We have what amounts to a controlled experiment in Clayton that provides a ready empirical test of these claims of the multiage classroom advocates, since one elementary school (Meramec) follows a traditional philosophy while the other two (Captain and Glenridge) have adopted the multiage innovation, yet there is no evidence whatsoever that the non-multiage school has more school yard fights or a poorer school climate. Indeed, it is silly to expect otherwise, notwithstanding the research studies cited by progressives. (The 1997 report said little about real, nontherapeutic learning. It no doubt must be a source of great annoyance to the two trendier Clayton elementary schools that neither one is able to top Meramec in the annual statewide academic assessments and school rankings despite the constant hype that attends all the latest progressive reforms adopted by staff in those buildings.)

When I asked the Glenridge principal why she supported multiage classrooms, she said, "I want our schools to mirror the real world, and where else other than in schools do we segregate six-year-olds from seven-year-olds and so forth? I want our schools to be like family." When I then noted that competition is also part of the real world, she replied "I don't believe competition is healthy for kids." Progressives love to invoke the real world as the justification for their reforms, but in fact they are only interested in those aspects of the real world that fit their ideological predispositions. Aside from promoting collectivist values, the multiage classroom helps get around the problems of social promotion and ability grouping, and is aimed especially at the low-achievers and kids from unstable homes (lacking "family"), who it is felt need the extra security of having the same teacher from one year to the next rather than being thrown annually into a new environment, even if the latter can provide a strong growing experience and foster self-reliance and an ability to meet new challenges.

The principal of Captain school was an even more ardent progressive than her Glenridge counterpart. She was intent on eliminating the multiage vs. traditional options that the school board had mandated be available to parents, wanting to see all children placed in the former setting, partly because she believed in the educational superiority of that approach and partly (I surmised) because a uniform system would be easier to administer. As so often happens in school districts, there was a carefully orchestrated effort at Captain to co-opt parents into accepting the changes desired by the building administration. In 1998, the principal brought in a "facilitator," an education professor from a local university, ostensibly to engage parents in a dialogue about the relative merits of multiage and traditional classrooms and elicit their views but who in fact was there to make a sales pitch for the new model. The professor in question was a known devotee of every progressive educational fad imaginable. As is often the case at such events, instead of balanced argument, full debate, presentation of hard empirical data, and other such things one might wish in a decision-making process, the deck was stacked. Parents were presented with a handout that stated "key reasons for breaking with traditional classroom structure" (a list of ten reasons supporting multiage grouping, which took up almost the entire page) and "some of the perceived negatives" (two items questioning the practice, which were buried at the very bottom of the page). Not only was there disparate space devoted to the two sides of the question, but note how the positives were characterized as "reasons" while the negatives rated only the word "perceived." The real kicker was the admission that "there are not huge differences between gains in these types of [multiage] classrooms and traditional classrooms," but "the anecdotal evidence *strongly* favors the multiage classrooms [italics mine]."

I dwell on this episode because it is as an example of how "facilitators" often operate as hired guns rather than as neutral peacemaking agents in K-12 education, how most progressive claims ultimately rest on anecdotal rather than scientific evidence, and how the anecdotes almost invariably happen to confirm the progressive position. It was a great illustration of "manipulated empowerment," in this case applied to parents. I should note that, in one of those too infrequent victories for parents, the principal failed to get the school board and administration to endorse multiage-only classrooms. One key to victory was my enlistment of a Captain parent in the traditionalist cause who happened to be a Harvard Law School graduate and was more than able to punch holes in the facilitator's argument. Other parent groups haven't been so fortunate. I heard from a parent in the Lake Oswego, NY School District who said that despite forming a "Citizens Against Blends" committee and publishing a brochure publicizing the negative features of multiage classrooms, they were unable to overcome the steamroller tactics of the district administration.

For those students whose "aggressive" tendencies are not adequately cured by the multiage classroom, Clayton has adopted a "violence prevention" curriculum which "must be integrated into the curriculum experienced daily by our students," which "is rooted in the context of all coursework," and which focuses on "personal development, building community, and conflict resolution." Upon learning of the adoption of this curriculum in 1996, I wrote to the school board as follows: "I can understand your being concerned with school safety, and I can even understand your having periodic student assemblies or programs on conflict resolution, but to expend energy on a violence prevention *curriculum* strikes me as overkill."

Like all school districts around the country, Clayton is awash in anti-prejudice as well as anti-violence projects. The centerpiece of this agenda is the "voluntary desegregation plan" whereby hundreds of African-American children from the city of St. Louis are bused to Clayton schools. Our district superintendent has called this "the largest school choice plan in the United States," even though there was never a vote (it was imposed by a federal judge) and even though choice is limited to only some city residents (wealthy blacks can participate but not poor Central European immigrants). Notwithstanding a recent court settlement permitting Clayton to end the program, the school district has continued this arrangement, for some noble motives (the desire to promote integration) and some less so (the desire to maintain access to state funds that support the plan and that augment district budgetary resources). The official justification usually offered to Clayton taxpayers by our district leadership is that kids who live in an almost all-white suburb must be exposed to diversity through the desegregation program if they are to be cleansed of their inborn racist tendencies, although it is curious that the leaders who most vociferously voice this social analysis generally attended segregated schools themselves but, miraculously I guess, managed to overcome their cloistered education.

If the deseg program and related multiculturalism efforts in Clayton could be proven to promote integration, then they might well be worthwhile. But these efforts often appear to be more likely to produce a boiling cauldron of racial and ethnic hypersensitivity à la Yugoslavia rather than the melting pot of the recent American past. In Clayton, as in much of the country, we seem to be turning our national motto "E Pluribus Unum" on its head, just as Al Gore inadvertently did in the 2000 presidential campaign when he erroneously translated our national calling as "out of the one, many."

We obsess over race in the Clayton school district, looking at children through their group skin color rather than treating them as individuals. Let me offer a few quick illustrations. The Pathfinders Project at Wydown Middle School aims to "increase enrollment of African American students in the Clayton High School Honors English program." The meaning of the boilerplate is obvious: honors selection will be based on group characteristics rather than personal performance. As an example of how invidious this is, I recall that, as my son Sean was about to graduate from Wydown and was being considered along with other children for the honors program at Clayton High, he told me that he saw a black friend of his brought to tears when her English teacher told her it did not really matter how well she did on the screening criteria since the district wanted to see more blacks in the honors courses. Until recently, Clayton also had a program which provided cash incentives for "deseg kids" to improve their grades, leading me to ask the school board whether we could expect to see newspaper headlines like "Deseg Kids Flock to Clayton, Where the Money Is." We seemed to be giving new meaning to the phrase "it pays to learn," one we would never consider applying to white students, for whom payola is considered a tacky substitute for gold stars and self-motivation. Since 1993, when Clayton convened an African-American Student Achievement Task Force, there have been dozens of programs targeted at blacks which, based on the premise that they needed special help, have had the effect of stigmatizing an entire group of students. "The soft bigotry of low expectations" may not be as virulent in Clayton as elsewhere, but it is present nonetheless.

In 1995, the all-white school board, elected by Clayton residents, voted 4-3 to appoint a liaison to the board from the black community to represent the city transfer students. I commented in the local paper at the time that "we are giving special treatment to one group of kids, based on the most odious of distinctions—skin color. [Appointing a special liaison for blacks indicates] that white members of the board, by virtue of their skin color, are incapable of representing African-American kids." The board majority seemed to take the view that there was a "black" perspective on math, English, professional development, building design, playground equipment, and other district business and, hence, a black had to have a seat at the table. Although the majority wrapped this decision in the rhetoric of democracy, there was no intention to put such a fundamental district governance change to a vote of the people, nor was it clear how one person, selected to fill the "black" seat, could purport to speak for the entire black community. As it turned out, the issue became so controversial that the liaison position ultimately was redefined so that the occupant did not participate in board meetings but merely periodically reported to the board about concerns raised by black parents.

Although African-Americans were the only group given a special liaison to the board, balkanization was not confined to race. At the same time that Clayton during the 1990s initiated a new organization called Parents of African American Students to share "issues especially relevant to the African American experience," it started up another group called Clayton Advocates for

Abilities Awareness to provide a voice for parents of disabled children and developed an "abilities awareness curriculum" to sensitize students to learning differences. There were efforts to organize girl support groups; I distinctly remember a candidate for school board one year making a big campaign issue out of fighting presumed discrimination against girls in the classroom, at a time when the president of the Clayton High School student body and the recipient of the senior scholar-athlete award were females along with over half the inductees into the CHS chapter of the National Honor Society.

I organized Parents Against Average Schools as an advocacy voice for the high-achievers, whether they were white or black, male or female, or belonged to any other category. The only qualification for "membership" in this group was that you had to be among the truly academic-minded. I never actually tried to get any official district endorsement of PAAS—in truth, it wasn't so much an organization as a mailing list of citizens with similar views—but it surely would have tested how fully committed the district was to diversity had I done so. My hunch is that the district would have sooner recognized a transgender group than a gifted association.

Clayton is also big on character education. All over the country, the *McGuffey Readers* have been reincarnated in the form of programs designed to instill "respect" and other "word of the day" values in today's student. Although I realize that most traditionalists (following William Bennett's lead) support character education, I nonetheless have raised several basic objections before the Clayton school board about the special curriculum that we adopted. First, there is the matter of it being a further distraction from academics; teachers are getting professional development training in character education when they should not be hired in the first place if they need this training, and when they should instead be getting professional development in upgrading their knowledge of history or math or other subject matter they teach. Secondly, I don't trust many of today's teachers to teach my kids values, given the politically correct mindset that currently dominates schools. Third, although I agree some children may well need character education to remedy the failure of their parents, other kids do in fact get it through home and church and do not need to have their school day taken up with this.

The minefield that is moral education today can be seen in the travails experienced by Lee Turner, who, upon taking over as principal of Clayton High School in 2000, lasted exactly one semester. He brought sterling academic credentials to the job—the private Florida high school he had headed produced many National Merit Scholars and, as a forensics coach, his debate students had won a national championship. But today academic leaders must first and foremost be good therapists, and Turner was old-school. He believed in a kind of Boy Scout code of honor that stressed duty, obedience, patriotism, decorum, discipline, and other such values that the flower-children generation of parents had long since repudiated. Even though Claytonians talked a good game about "personal responsibility," there was an air of extreme permissiveness at the high school, reflected not only in a rampant drug and alcohol culture but also in a library where the noise level and unruliness gave the appearance more of a cafeteria or gym than of a place of learning.

Turner saw his job as changing the school culture, restoring some civility (which in itself is "character education" *avant la lettre*). Although his authoritarian style certainly contributed to his downfall, he may well have failed even had he exhibited better, shall we say, interpersonal intelligence, given the mismatch between his values and the values of the school community. His first mistake was demanding that one student sporting a garish Mohawk hairdo see his barber; it was probably the wrong battle at the wrong time at the wrong place, since the principal instantly attracted the ire of the "free expression" police who admonished him for violating the first amendment right of students to parade in outlandish costumes. He also arranged a Veterans' Day assembly that engaged students in old-fashioned flag-waving, instituted new rules in the library calling for quiet, strengthened policies against student absences and tardiness, and took other measures which produced considerable snickering and ridicule in the community. In the end, he was forced to resign.

A Spreading Conflict

Clayton is not alone in its embrace of the therapeutic classroom. I recounted the Cissy Lacks' "tale of the tape." Although the Ferguson-Florissant school district sanctioned her for carrying the therapeutic classroom too far, many local educators consider

Lacks a role model for the modern teacher and a martyr to the cause of progressive education. The growth of the nonacademic mission can be found increasingly throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area and the nation. Indeed, the trend is even making its way around the world. The Clayton High flyer that announced the appearance of Mark Scharenbroich noted that he "has personally spoken in over 2,000 high schools from above the Arctic Circle to below the Panama Canal," suggesting the international reach of his comedy act. As further evidence of how such practices as cooperative learning have spilled across borders, I remember reading a newspaper at breakfast a couple of years ago while attending a conference in Toronto and seeing a teacher quoted as saying (about the new standardized tests used in Ontario schools) that "it is unfair that her students were being assessed individually since they were used to working collaboratively." I almost choked on my Canadian bacon. In the United Kingdom, it is reported that "progressive ed banished competition and testing as harmful and elitist; the result is underachieving young males," referring to the tendency today to pit boys against girls and for an anti-competition culture to privilege the latter. On the other side of the globe, Japanese schools, which long have had tracking in high school and strict discipline and homework throughout all grades (resulting in Japanese students outperforming American students on most international tests), are now considering responding to criticisms that they put too much pressure on students to "study, study, study."

One of the best examples of the way in which the line between academic and nonacademic activities is becoming blurred in bizarre ways can be seen in the new way of teaching English literature that has been adopted at Pattonville High School, located in St. Louis County not too far from Clayton. Taking psychosocial behavior modification and situational learning, along with team teaching and interdisciplinary coursework, to a new level, a Pattonville ninth-grade teacher has teamed with an officer from the Maryland Heights Police Department to teach such classics as *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *To Kill A Mockingbird.* According to a news article, the teacher in question "called the police—for a little teaching help....The goal of her lesson plan was for her students to understand the importance of communication, respect and tolerance to promote harmony. Her use of articles from the *Post-Dispatch* about curfew violations, teen drinking, teen-age love and behavior earned her recognition as a 1998 Teacher of the Year.... [In *Romeo and Juliet*], the officer added relevance to the play by relating the characters and the plot to problems he deals with involving teens in everyday life. 'This turned out to be the highlight of our year' [said the teacher]." Note the assumption that kids cannot deal with abstraction but need somebody like a police officer to come in off the street to bring literature down to their level.

Another St. Louis County high school, Webster Groves, is also promoting harmony, in a manner reminiscent of the demise of the U. City jazz band. The high school recently adopted a new policy mandating that all students in the concert and jazz bands had to participate also in the marching band, since "marching taught students to work together as a group." A group mentality is found everywhere in St. Louis, from the most elite college-prep schools like Clayton to the St. Louis Career Academy, the voc-tech school in St. Louis city. A news article reported recently about the latter that "the St. Louis Career Academy isn't your traditional vocational school. Students will learn by doing [group] projects....The idea is to create a family-like environment and to get students used to working together, officials say." No, this is not your father's trade school. It sounds more like the multiage classroom in Clayton. Why would Clayton seek to mirror the St. Louis Career Academy, or vice versa? Because pack pedagogy cannot seem to distinguish between different school settings and different student needs. The explanation you constantly hear from K-12 reformers is that business people want schools to teach teamwork. The contradiction is that most of the business community thrives on competition.

In yet another St. Louis-area school district, Francis Howell, some staff members recently gave glowing reports on what they had learned from a Dr. Charles Schwann at an Outcomes-Based Education Conference in Custer, South Dakota. In an unambiguous reference to the shift away from academics, they proclaimed in a memo to colleagues: "Today the purpose of schools is to ensure that our graduates are ACADEMICALLY COMPETENT students. Tomorrow we must ensure LIFE-ROLE PERFORMANCE SUCCESS for our graduates. We must define what will be necessary to insure our students will be successful in their workplace and future life." Apparently, neither the speaker nor the staff had ever heard of the disaster that was the life adjustment movement of the 1940s and 1950s. I have noted how K-12 educators suffer from amnesia, but this seemed an especially acute case.

Clayton, Ferguson-Florissant, Pattonville, Webster Groves, and Francis Howell are all members of The Cooperating School Districts of St. Louis (CSD), which, in addition to spreading the gospel of multiple intelligences theory, also has been spreading the gospel of character education. Character*plus*, coordinated through CSD, reaches fifty Missouri districts with more than 425 schools and 250,000 students. Founded by the former head of McDonnell Douglas Aviation, it calls itself "the nation's largest community-wide response to the challenge of character education." The current director of the program wrote an op-ed piece defending the program: "Within days of assuming office [in 2001], Gov. Bob Holden announced that he wants the state to set aside $1 million to expand a program to teach character education in public schools....I was asked: Why would we want to spend a million dollars to pull children out of math and science classes to be taught character education? Values can be taught along with math and science and in all the curriculum. The goal is not for a separate program, but to integrate character education into the daily life of the school." If the character education envisioned here simply meant embedding basic virtues such as honesty and hard work into the everyday rhythm of a school, it would be one thing. The fact is, however, that it *is* a program unto itself, and a potentially distracting one at that, involving forty-eight different character traits that are supposed to be worked into lesson plans. When one adds this mandate to diversity training and all the other diversions of the contemporary classroom, it is hard to see how academics will not suffer. There would seem to be better ways to spend a million dollars.

Perhaps nowhere in America has there been a greater effort to bring together all the most progressive elements of the therapeutic classroom than at Celebration School in Celebration, Florida, a "highly planned brave new town" created by the Walt Disney Company. When it opened in 1997, Celebration School was the epitome of the child-centered commune, the educational version of the New Left workplace democracy model. It was designed to serve kindergarteners through twelfth-graders under one roof, complete with multiage classrooms, computers in lieu of textbooks, and unstructured classes that dispensed with tests and individual letter grades and in their place substituted a different sort of regimen built around group projects. As often happens with Alice-in-Wonderland ideas, "the happiest school on earth" failed to withstand reality-testing. Parents complained about the lack of homework, the antipathy toward standardized testing, and the absence of any grade point averages, practices which did not augur well for their kids getting into Harvard. When the school, in an effort to address the concerns of these parents, redesigned some elements of its program, it was accused by the more progressive parents of betraying the initial vision of the school. All the cooperative learning that the school had prided itself on could not prevent conflict and turmoil. Three years after its opening, parents "were queuing up to withdraw their children."

What's More Important, Feeling or Knowing?

As ubiquitous as character education programs are, they are eclipsed by those programs dearest to progressive educators, the ones, such as anger management and conflict resolution, that are most emotive in nature and that have become especially popular as hoped-for deterrents to the spate of recent shootings at Columbine and other schools. Even if there were evidence that these diversions from academic pursuits are producing more feeling human beings, there would still be the question of whether the school day is better taken up with lessons in feeling or lessons in knowing. The focus on building better people and communities has a proper and inescapable place in schools. It has, however, come to dominate our schools in a perverse way that I have only partially described in the above stories. Let's look more deeply into the inner workings of the therapeutic classroom and the extent to which affective learning has replaced cognition as the primary purpose of K-12 education.

The High Esteem K-12 Places on Self-Esteem

Diane Ravitch places what she calls "the self-esteem movement" in historical context: "In the late 1930s, the Progressive Education Association—an advocacy group for child-centered education...—launched a new campaign to persuade school officials that the academic curriculum conflicted with the 'needs of youth.' Several major PEA publications contended that the nation's high schools should concentrate on their students' personal, emotional, and social problems rather than academic studies.... By the 1980s, self-esteem was touted in professional literature as both a means and an end of education. Anything that might encourage higher academic standards—such as grades, standards, deadlines, homework, correction of grammar or spelling—was potentially a threat to students' self-esteem," which, if damaged, could then undermine their achievement. Ravitch notes it has become hard to separate self-esteem from multiculturalism and the other strands of the therapeutic classroom: "The big theory that many seized upon [in the 1980s and 1990s] to resolve the yawning achievement gap [between African-American and Hispanic-American pupils on the one hand and European-American and Asian-American pupils on the other] was that low-performing students would achieve more if they had higher self-esteem.... In short order, this theory evolved into a generalized belief that the schools should help all children develop higher self-esteem." Here again we see the pattern of educators allowing the bottom to drive the entire curriculum for the entire student body. What recently has been called "the middle school philosophy"—that is, nurturing students' emotional needs at a time when their hormones are commonly depicted as "raging"—has become the operant philosophy for pre-hormonal and post-hormonal development throughout K-12 education.

Few would question the proposition that self-esteem is important and that liking oneself may make it easier to like others. But there is little scientific evidence that self-esteem programs in themselves produce better "feelers." Indeed, a recent study by researchers from Case Western University and the University of Virginia found that high self-esteem, particularly artificially inflated self-esteem ungrounded in real accomplishments, seems to be correlated with violent tendencies. Based on an examination of dozens of empirical studies of behaviors ranging from bullying to murder, the authors concluded that "violent and criminal individuals have been repeatedly characterized as arrogant, confident, narcissistic, egotistical, assertive, proud, and the like." A related study found that many college students have unrealistically high opinions of themselves and are often unable to tolerate criticism, sometimes becoming violent when their exaggerated self-image, cultivated by years of ego-stroking in grade school, comes up against someone who dares to say "you are wrong."

If there is scant evidence that K-12's emphasis on self-esteem-building will necessarily produce better feelers, there is even less evidence that it will produce better thinkers and knowers. Research commissioned by a 1990 Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem created by the California legislature failed to find any link between self-esteem and improved academic achievement. Indeed, one of the researchers commented that "one of the most disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume...is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are," calling them "mixed, insignificant, or absent." Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan has found that American fifth-graders and eleventh-graders surpass their Asian counterparts in labeling themselves as having high self-esteem, at the same time that Asian students surpass American students in terms of actual academic performance. While Asian students may be too hard on themselves, their American peers may be too easy. Stevenson says that "self-esteem theorists have it backward. Meaningful self-evaluation and positive self-esteem are usually results, not antecedents, of accomplishment.... Feeling good is fine. It is even better when we have something to feel good about." The same sentiments are echoed by Carl Lutz, the former president of Chrysler Corporation: "I believe that self-esteem comes only from hard work and legitimate achievement. I think failure is a wonderful teacher, and that shielding a student from failure is a form of child abuse."

The nicest and most satisfying communication I ever received from a former student was a copy of a letter that he had submitted for my tenure and promotion file, thanking me for flunking him:

> During my first two years at the University of Missouri, I had very little direction and almost as little ambition. Then one fall I enrolled in a course called "World Politics." The professor was Martin Rochester. I approached the course half-hearted. I missed a good deal of the lectures but assumed that I would slide through with my usual "C" grade. I was wrong. I failed the course. Despite my failing grade, I learned something from the class. I learned that there are professors who really care about their students. One might believe that failing a student is hardly a show of affection; but it sent the right message to me. If I had received another "C" I would have continued to drift through my education. Instead I was shocked into reality. I can honestly say that Professor Rochester

> changed my life. For the next three years I consistently made the Dean's List and eventually graduated *cum laude*.

I quote at length because it conveys a message of simple common sense, that "tough love" is the best overall approach to take in motivating students to learn. I also include the letter here as an object lesson for today's progressive educators, who take their cues from the likes of Alfie Kohn, whose *Punished by Rewards* argues naively that the "intrinsic satisfaction" of learning is a more effective motivational tool than "extrinsic" rewards and punishments in the form of grades. Kohn is a devotee of the gradeless report card; if teachers must give grades, he urges they give only two kinds, As and incompletes—anything to avoid the dreaded F, even if it encourages students to procrastinate and accumulate delayed grades in course after course. While Kohn cites research he contends supports his position, he conveniently ignores, as progressives are wont to do, the larger body of research and the even larger body of professorial experience that refutes him.

Fortunately, there is of late some evidence that K-12 education may be in a period of adjustment where the pendulum is slowly swinging back from the excessive emphasis on self-esteem that characterized the 1980s and 1990s. One recent article notes that "in a sea change from the gestalt of recent decades, many educators and child psychologists are concluding that less praise is often better and frequent praise for unexceptional actions can actually have a negative impact on children. 'Praising every time lowers a child's motivation' [says one expert]." The question that continues to nag at me is why it takes such experts so long to figure out what the average man or woman on the street already knows, and why they cannot get it right the first time. Even the "middle school philosophy"—the apotheosis of therapeutic thinking in K-12 education—is undergoing rethinking. A recent *Education Week* article entitled "Muddle in the Middle" observes that "thirty years after districts began shifting away from junior versions of high school, the middle school model has come under attack for supplanting academic rigor with a focus on students' social, emotional, and physical needs." The article cites the backlash felt in one school district in particular, Howard County, Maryland, where a report commissioned by the Board of Education and compiled by a parents group concluded that the district's middle schools had "sacrificed academic excellence by putting too much emphasis on fostering students' self-esteem." The report quoted a teacher as confessing that "the lesson [students] learn from the middle school philosophy is that they do not have to do anything they don't feel like doing."

It is still unclear whether the K-12 profession as a whole is capable of learning any lessons from the many backlashes that progressive reforms provoke, of which the revulsion against the self-esteem movement is only one. In addition to the fading of the self-esteem fad, there is a backlash waiting to happen over cooperative learning and other progressive hobbyhorses associated with the therapeutic classroom that are beginning to come under greater scrutiny, again mostly from observers outside the K-12 establishment—outside the schools of education and curriculum offices, where stubborn pride and the fear of damaged reputations often prevent acknowledgment of mistakes that are readily apparent to parents, teachers, and others at ground-zero who see the fallout first-hand.

Conflicting Views on Cooperative Learning

Although there is good reason to encourage children early in life to appreciate the importance of "we" rather than "me," our schools have taken the "it takes a village" slogan to such excess that they risk producing a growing number of village idiots.

Cooperative learning has been described as "an instructional method in which small groups of students of varying abilities...are expected to work together as a team to complete a daily assignment or a long-term project. In theory, each individual in the group is accountable for contributing to the end product. In reality, the work usually ends up falling on the shoulders of one or two more capable students whose sense of personal responsibility and motivation keeps everyone else from failing." While it is axiomatic that children should be encouraged to help each other, this should not be the key pedagogical principle around which the classroom is organized, as in the case of multiage classrooms and many other school settings today. I have spoken to countless parents who rightly resent their high-achieving children being exploited by being asked to mentor slower learners, by being denied teacher instruction pitched to their level, and by having to accept a group grade that either penalizes them for the poor work produced by other group members or rewards the latter for work done by the former. Although supporters of cooperative learning often wrap themselves in the rhetoric of democracy to justify this pedagogy, it is hard to see how principles of justice and fairness are served by elevating the group to such an exalted plane. And, for high and low achievers alike, it is hard to imagine a pedagogical practice more likely to produce the kind of "dependent learners" progressives claim to abhor.

It is especially disingenuous of progressives to defend cooperative learning as something that has been practically forced upon schools in response to the new demands of the workplace, when, as I noted earlier, schools often are critical of the values of big business and, in social studies classes especially, tend to present American capitalism generally in an unfavorable light as uncaring and greedy. Cooperative learning has become chic in schools not because of the new demands of capitalism but because of the heightened commitment of schools to a collectivist ethos that is as old as John Dewey, who, after visiting the Soviet Union in the 1920s, applauded "the marvelous development of progressive educational ideas and practice under the fostering care of the Bolshevik government." Shortly before Dewey's pilgrimage to Moscow, a group of his fellow progressives had issued a landmark report on secondary education in which they stated: "Among the means for developing attitudes and habits important in a democracy are the assignment of projects and problems to groups of pupils for cooperative solution...[in order to] give training in collective thinking." Since socialism is now passé, today's progressive educators are forced to look to capitalism to legitimize their collectivist tendencies. There is more hype than reality, though, behind the claim that the modern firm is all about teamwork:

> "A great many more firms talk about teamwork than do it in any meaningful way" [admits a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education].... In a recent article in *The Harvard Business Review* titled "The Myth of the Top Management Team," [a consultant with McKinsey and Company] argued that groups of top managers that called themselves teams seldom actually worked together in pursuit of a particular goal.... [In an interview he said] too often teamwork becomes a feel-good mechanism that can get in the way of actually accomplishing something.... "The notion of the team-based organization is dangerous because you will try to do everything as a team. It's a crazy idea."...[A management professor at MIT adds that] it can be hard to square the fact that at the same time managers are ruthlessly pursuing bottom-line profits and their

bonuses, they are also urging workers to consider themselves part of the company team. And for all the talk of the need for team players, the star system remains alive and well in business.

As one researcher who analyzed fifty-six studies from twelve countries concluded about the grouping practices in multiage classrooms, the best case that can be made for them is that "these classes are simply no worse, and no better, than single-grade or single-age classes." That's not exactly a ringing endorsement and high return on investment for a pedagogy that has been sold as a cure for everything from school shootings to academic failure and has entailed high costs in terms of upsetting normal building routines. Let's have less hype and more serious research on this issue. (I do not much care if the research is done individually or collaboratively.) And let's have less professional development in such areas as "Advanced Cooperative Learning," the title of a one-credit course advertised by a St. Louis-area school of education.

The Multiculturalism Nursery

Mao Zedong, the father of Communist China, wrote the book on "manipulated empowerment." He called it the Red Book. One of his most famous sayings was "let a hundred flowers bloom," referring to the unleashing of creative energies associated with China's catastrophic Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Today the multiculturalism crusade in K-12 education in America might well be best captured in the phrase "let 1,500 flowers bloom."

Why 1,500? Because that is the estimated number of distinct ethnic groups that are found around the planet, each of which, according to the prevailing logic of multiculturalists, needs to be studied, understood, respected, and honored, whether such groups have any representatives in the United States or not. There are not enough days, much less months, in the year to devote to all 1,500, so that we risk some groups being privileged more than others. Is it fair, after all, that we should now celebrate African-American Heritage Month (February), Asian-American Heritage Month (May), Hispanic-American Heritage Month (September), and American Indian Heritage Month (November), with all the other minorities having to scramble to stake a claim to the remaining months? Things are further complicated by the fact that some months are reserved for non-ethnic tribal units, such as National

Women's History Month (March) and, if the National Education Association has its way, Gay and Lesbian Month. Things get even stickier, when one realizes that "Hispanic" is an artificial, catch-all category. Perhaps we need special weeks slotted for Cuban-Americans, Chicano-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and just plain Spanish-Americans.

There may be as many as 7,000 distinct languages spoken in the world. The United States is a nation of immigrants that includes virtually every dialect spoken anywhere. Why should Hispanics be privileged with special bilingual programs in American schools when, it could be argued, newly arrived Bosnian immigrants and the other 6,999 foreign tongues are no less deserving of bilingual accommodation? Were multiculturalism to be carried to its logical extreme, one could see entire school budgets taken up with bilingual programs. Then there is also the matter of "student learning styles." As hard as it is for a teacher to teach to Gardner's seven different intelligences, imagine having to teach to thousands of different learning styles based on a child's "distinctive" oral or other tradition.

Ethnic cheerleading is now part of the fabric of our schools. Walk into any school building in America, especially any elementary school, and you will see walls plastered with drawings in tribute to every conceivable minority, most of which are assumed to be oppressed.

On the surface, there is nothing wrong with multiculturalism and much that is right, if we interpret the term to mean getting students to appreciate the richness and diversity of the human species. But rather than emphasizing either the singular, unique humanity of each of six billion human beings, or what all of them have in common, our schools are stressing what amounts to tribal groupings. In the United States in particular, as I suggested earlier, we are promoting balkanization, not unity. We are distancing ourselves from the melting pot history that has defined the American experience. If schools in the past were at times guilty of teaching a sanitized, exclusionist history that did not fully cover the flaws in the American experiment and the range of peoples who contributed in a positive way to that experiment, today we are guilty of other distortions. Arthur Schlesinger has put it best in his recent work, *The Disuniting of America*:

> The new ethnic gospel in its militant form rejects the unifying concept of a unique American identity, rejects the ideal of individuals

> from all nations melted into a new race, rejects the ideals of assimilation and integration, rejects the common culture—its underlying philosophy is that America is not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups, that ethnicity is the defining experience for most Americans.

William Pfaff, a leading student of nationalism, adds that "American education is no longer didactic about citizenship or deliberately assimilative with respect to minorities, as it was in earlier periods of immigration. Then it insisted upon the acculturation of immigrants' children by teaching them English and American literature, American history, and...'civics'. [Today, such teaching] is denigrated as elitist, ethnocentric, imperialist, and patriarchal.... [We now] see American society in census terms: white, plus African-American, Hispanic, Asian-Pacific Islander, etc."

Higher education is just as much at fault for bean-counting as K-12, perhaps even more so, since a "roots" approach to history is rooted in the many multicultural studies programs that have blossomed across American campuses. (My own university has an entire bureaucracy housed in a Multi-Cultural Relations Office whose primary job is to implement the various monthly observances and to root out supposed institutional racism on a campus which during the course of the 1990s had a black chancellor and vice-chancellor in the top two leadership posts.) The K-12 social studies profession bears special blame. One critic explains, echoing Schlesinger and Pfaff:

> The critical question is what kind of multicultural education is most appropriate for our children? Although the treatment of ethnicity in social studies is complex, two visions of multicultural education seem to have emerged. There is a vision of multiculturalism that emphasizes cultural and ethnic differences and the nation's failure to live up to our ideals. There is a second vision...that, while recognizing our differences, accentuates what Americans have in common and our positive evolution in a diverse society....A disproportionately high number of leading multicultural theorists within the social studies profession are advocates of a critical separatist multiculturalism.... In fact, the theorists are less interested in multicultural content than in affective multicultural education. [They] place a high priority on multicultural education as a tool to improve ethnic group relations, raise specific groups' self-esteem...and stimulate citizen action to transform America.

Identity politics, of course, is not limited to ethnicity but extends to gender as well. Progressives have taken as an article of faith the proposition that females continue to be discriminated against in K-12 education, especially in math and science, partly because of the traditional emphasis placed in those fields on logical intelligence as opposed to the more creative intelligences and partly because boys are seen as more competitive and able to dominate the classroom. There is little empirical evidence to support this proposition. If anything, it seems girls are doing better than boys today in the nation's schools. As just one example, in 2001, for the first time, women were about to outnumber men in law school admissions. Christina Hoff Sommers writes: "This we think we know: American schools favor boys and grind down girls. The truth is the very opposite. By virtually every measure, girls are thriving in school; it is boys who are the second sex." Perhaps, it is because, as teachers increasingly have employed cooperative learning that is thought to favor girls' affinity for teamwork, girls are now more at home in school. If boys have become the "second sex," perhaps it is simply a function of the relentless feminist drumbeat that has led teachers to feel sorry for girls and, possibly, to practice reverse discrimination against boys. (At a middle school assembly, my son's science teacher, a woman, once ridiculed males with the line that "in the case of our boys, it's like a dog's life but in reverse," meaning that fourteen-year-old boys often act with the maturity of seven-year-olds; it would have been unthinkable to utter such an insult against girls, for fear of NOW being sicked on you.) Boys and girls obviously are different anatomically and probably even temperamentally, but we do both a disservice when we engage them in a battle of the sexes and base educational judgments on gender pigeonholing.

I once told the Clayton school board that as a teacher, when it came time for me to grade papers and exams, I still followed the quaint practice of not wanting to know whether the student was white, black, male, female, or belonged to any other categorical group. I do not teach to learning styles. I have one common standard to which all are held. I find this enables me to avoid stereotyping and other malicious effects that flow from obsessing over group identity. I work especially hard to resist racial profiling, which liberals object to when done by police departments in New Jersey and elsewhere but otherwise condone in the context of schooling. I take seriously Thurgood Marshall's admonition, stated before the U.S. Supreme Court when he was representing the NAACP in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation case, that "distinctions by race are so evil, so arbitrary and insidious that a state bound to defend the equal protection of the laws must not allow them in any public sphere."

But such a view puts me squarely at odds with the latest thinking in K-12 education. Typical of the stereotyping and "soft bigotry" that now dominates American schools is the statement made at a recent seminar on race and education sponsored by the St. Louis Cooperating School Districts: "African-Americans come from an oral tradition....What is killing them is that standardized tests are not the right approach to measure intelligence." The K-12 scholarly literature often calls for sensitivity to group learning styles: "Research about the African-American culture shows that students often value oral experiences, physical activity, and loyalty in interpersonal relations....These traits call for classroom activities that include approaches like discussion, active projects, and collaborative work. Descriptions indicate that Native-American people generally...have reflective thinking patterns and generally value and develop acute visual discrimination....Thus, schooling should provide quiet time for thinking and emphasize visual stimuli."

Such a vision is perilously close to racism. It also risks defeating the major purpose of education, that is, forcing a young person to get outside of his or her "skin," to stretch experiences to include foreign ideas, indeed to imagine things that have no empirical references anywhere, such as "dinosaurs or lost civilizations." Rather than enriching children's lives, multiculturalism can have the opposite, parochializing effect. Multiculturalism can also have the effect of distorting reality, when we rewrite history in order to make everybody feel good about their ethnicity. We certainly should not overlook the contributions made by African-Americans and other people of color, but we also should not exaggerate them, as Afrocentrists do when they claim that the Ancient Greeks stole all their novel ideas from the Dark Continent—one of the views that is unfortunately present in many inner city public schools. The same can be said for histories of women, whose everyday lives no doubt are worth chronicling but who, precisely because of centuries-old oppression, were not positioned to shape history as powerfully as men. If we give equal coverage to Beethoven and Beethoven's mother, as one feminist recommends, we trivialize history. For better or worse, the fact is DWEMs (Dead White European Males) have dominated much of the history of the world, certainly the history of the United States. If one really believes in situational learning, then one should heed Edwin Yoder's advice to social studies teachers in America's classrooms:

> [Young people] need to learn first about our own traditions, and those from which they derive. You can't understand the ideas in the Declaration of Independence without knowing a bit about John Locke's treatise on government. Locke leads back into the English revolution of 1688. And that may lead back to Magna Carta....We should learn who we are before we venture to learn who we aren't.

When multiculturalists talk about cultural imperialism, they could be referring to the little empires they are building for themselves, as multiculturalism may be the leading growth industry in K-12 education. Not far behind, though, is the violence prevention industry.

Taking Violence Prevention Too Far

We need to be careful not to exaggerate the problem of school violence, since school shootings are still relatively rare. We also need to recognize that no amount of preventative measures can hope to eliminate completely the kind of random, lunatic mayhem committed by extremely disturbed kids. Still, there is reason to be concerned about the recent flurry of such episodes, and reason to try to respond with deterrent policies. The question is whether the approaches now in vogue are likely to work.

I have noted that the proliferation of school shootings has coincided with the growing emphasis schools have placed on self-esteem and other such bromides. One cannot blame the therapeutic classroom as the cause of school violence, but neither can one credit it with any visible success. One social psychologist goes so far as to suggest that the delivery of the entire K-12 academic curriculum be predicated upon violence prevention, through a "jigsaw classroom" structure that "requires students to cooperate and to share their knowledge with one another." Why a few pistol-packing students should now be the driving force dictating the restructuring of our schools and what evidence exists that "required cooperation" will make even a dent in the problem leave me puzzled.

Following the Santana High School shooting spree in a San Diego suburb in 2001, the *New York Times* quoted a state education department official as saying that Santana "was a school that did basically everything that we suggested they do," including training students in mediation techniques. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* added, "It did everything right [such as] programs to help youngsters get along, including one called 'Names can really hurt us,'" an anti-bullying program. Although the perpetrator was new to the school, having just arrived from Maryland, he was not new to a K-12 culture which for years was promoting the therapeutic classroom across the country. The *New York Times* reported that the number of school health clinics, including mental heath services, had jumped from 200 to 1,380 over the decade of the 1990s. The post-mortem done at Columbine High, the suburban high school in Littleton, Colorado where two teenagers murdered thirteen fellow students in 1999, revealed that the pair had just performed forty-five hours of community service and had received extensive counseling that included an anger management class. Indeed, a few years earlier the *Wall Street Journal* had run a story on Littleton, Colorado as a school district run by "educational faddists" who had made the district a leader in progressive education.

It would appear that progressive nostrums are no more likely to guarantee protection against future incidents of school violence than more metal detectors or more gun control laws. Matthew Rees notes that the track record of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act, the federal program that funds most violence prevention projects in the public schools, is quite dubious: "Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on activities with little or no record of success.... [Grant money has been] used to pay for questionable activities like motivational speakers...and magic shows. The Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence has surveyed more than 400 violence-prevention programs used in schools and communities and found that most had not been subjected to credible evaluations or had no record of effectiveness. This includes such fashionable approaches as conflict resolution, peer mediation, and individual counseling."

We should not be overreacting to news headlines about school shootings by instituting excessive suspensions and expulsions, although some are necessary as part of a "zero tolerance" policy. We should also not be overreacting by instituting excessive touchy-feely conflict measures. Some school systems, such as one in Austin, Texas, have gone to the extreme of banning dodgeball. A "curriculum specialist" in the Austin schools was quoted recently as stating that "this is something that should not be used in today's classroom," since "what we have seen is that it does not make students feel good about themselves." Most of us remember dodgeball as a light-hearted recreational outlet, as a relatively harmless way to expend energy during lunch break. Now the activity is a target of condemnation and the subject of weighty Ph.D. dissertations and journal articles calling for an end to all "elimination sports." It is tempting to surmise that, indeed, some of the people behind these reforms may well have been hit in the head by one dodgeball too many when they were youngsters, but that would be discourteous.

Let Schools Be Schools

In 1994, the Committee for Economic Development, which includes executives at 250 large U.S. corporations, issued a much publicized report entitled *Putting Learning First* that warned that K-12 staff were expected to be "parent, social worker, doctor, psychologist, police officer, and perhaps, if there is time, teacher." The committee chairman noted that school programs were "diluted, distracted, and diffused from the basic mission of education." As U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley said at the time in summing up the report at a news conference, "American public schools are being spread too thin." One newspaper editorial, entitled "Let Schools be Schools," added that "recent education reform efforts have fallen short because they...did not concentrate on academic excellence to the exclusion of other concerns." Sadly, "other concerns" continue to crowd out academics. The study of Shakespeare, the Peloponnesian War, the U.S. Constitution—to the extent they are taught at all—are now seen as mere vehicles whereby we cultivate character and teamwork, promote self-actualization, and improve society.

Toward the end of his life, Albert Shanker, the head of the American Federation of Teachers who saw up close the failed promise of American education, wrote a column applauding the Committee for Economic Development report, in which he commented that "CED's insistence that the academic mission should be at the center of our educational arrangements is refreshing and important….The idea might seem pretty obvious, but many people around the schools still frown at the mention of 'academic mission.'…And the majority believe that the chief purpose of the schools is the socialization of youngsters—teaching them how to get along together rather than how to do math and science." As much as K-12 gurus frown at the phrase "academic mission," they are even more contemptuous of the phrase "the 3 Rs" and the assumption associated with that phrase, namely that schools above all else are expected to provide young people with a solid grounding in "the basics." In the early 1900s, one of the most popular texts used in schools of education, amazingly, contained the following advice to future teachers:

> Traditionally the elementary school has been primarily devoted to teaching the fundamental subjects, the three R's and closely related disciplines.… Artificial exercises, like drills on phonetics, multiplication tables, and formal writing movements, are used to a wasteful degree. Subjects such as arithmetic, language, and history include content that is intrinsically of little value.

Succeeding generations of K-12 practitioners learned their lessons well over the course of the twentieth century, so much so that, as they entered the twenty-first century, educators had managed to turn "basics" into a dirty word inspiring ridicule, except among parents who were left wondering what K-12's charter was if not to pour a solid academic foundation for their children.