

The Passy Press

Letter to the Editor

From grantmacmurray@undisclosed.com

To: Nick Gardiner enpg@thepassypress.com

Date: September 10, 2014 2:45pm EST

Subject: Reviewing John MacMurray's Essay on US Education

Dear Sir,

1) Incentives for top-notch teachers. Not just money, but a higher degree of input into curriculum, who is in their classes, status/respect (however defined) etc. (Also, this won't be popular, but demerits for teachers who fail to measure up. And certainly an overhaul of the tenure system.)

2) My thinking is probably undemocratic, so excuse me, but I would go about separating the wheat from the chaff as soon as possible. Aptitude can be discerned fairly early on as well as the overall attitude of a student. It is my opinion that these factors don't change, if anything they just get more entrenched. Although the European/English system seems overly deterministic to us, I think it has its merits.

3) Specialization early on. I'm not saying that a six year old, should have to choose his major, but I feel that in certain instances preparing a child for a practical occupation is best.

What else? When I was in grammar school we had a prep for prep student, who used to tell us about having to hide his books in a pizza box. (I did not believe him, at the time, the idea of being actively hostile to expanding one's horizons was absurd to me.) This kid went on to St. Paul's, Harvard, (Harvard?) medical school, and became a practicing M.D. This however was an exceptionally bright, determined young man, who I have to say, probably never felt at home in either environment. I think motivation and smarts have a lot to do with it but how to raise institutional standards, I don't know.

Unfortunately, I feel that a certain corruption of the American ethos, has led to a prevailing sentiment where it is considered unfair that a particular boy or girl should be intellectually more gifted than his or her peers (or at least singled out for being such). We have no problem separating out on the playing fields, and pat ourselves on the back at how unsentimentally Darwinian we are in that regard.

Ultimately I think the problem is misevaluation. Gifted students (and its easier to spot than not) should be groomed and picked out as soon as possible. I think the present justification is, that

somehow being among a wide swath will prepare them for life, that you don't want any hot house flowers. I disagree with this, I think that care should be paid almost exclusively to the bright capable and uniquely gifted. Again, I understand this may seem somehow elitist but it is my feeling that we are quashing the exceptional for the sake of the common.

One more thing. I have a friend. Family man, two boys. Columbia undergrad, Columbia law, about as smart as they come. Anyway, he tried to get a teaching job through a program NY city was offering at the time. Part of it was that you agree to teach students with learning disabilities in high-risk areas, and in return they send you for your masters. So against his wife's wishes (the drop in salary would have been marked) and because he really wanted to teach he applied to this thing and they turned him down. I have no idea what their reasoning was, but if you're turning down a guy like this, there's something fouled up. If he ends up teaching anyway it'll probably be at City College, or some private school here, but he really wanted to be of service. That part I don't understand.

Ok. I've managed to go on, anyway. These, let me just say are my intuitive responses, in terms of what practically can be done I have no idea. I will say that the martial arts or even some form of Tai Chi, are never bad for focus and discipline.

All the best,

Grant MacMurray

Grant MacMurray was born and raised in Manhattan. He graduated from Trinity College, Hartford, in 2000 with a B.A. in English. He currently resides in Brooklyn Heights where he writes articles and features for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.