

# The Passy Press

## Letter to the Editor

**From:** [ned.rossiter@undisclosed.com](mailto:ned.rossiter@undisclosed.com)

**To:** Nick Gardiner [enpg@thepassypress.com](mailto:enpg@thepassypress.com)

**Date:** September 27, 2014 1:05PM EST

**Subject:** Observations on John MacMurray's Essay on US Education

Dear Sir:

John MacMurray's essay on the current state of American education in the current Passy Press is a clear and well-wrought summary of the issues. He touches on the strengths and weaknesses of our federal system in implementing educational reform. He rightly notes that this country is too big and diverse for any kind of specific national curriculum to work. He laments the current low status of the teaching profession and the corresponding failure of our children to measure up to international educational standards. Finally, he reviews the main thrusts of the reform movement focused as it is on charter schools and testing based on the Common Core curriculum. He concludes with a call for a compulsory national service program.

I find little to argue with here in terms of his main points. What he misses, or fails to emphasize, is how bad things really are. American schools are wracked with conflict and confusion about goals, and about ends and means. The quality of teaching sags. The influx of immigrant children, called ELL (English language learners) is putting an unimaginable strain on schools across the land. Every effort at what is known as edreform meets with pushback and resistance so as to produce a kind of zero sum process. Efforts to improve something here get cancelled out by something else there. In education, as everywhere else, the political process is gridlocked. California, and other states are on the way to abolishing tenure for teachers. Teachers unions, controversial in themselves, are under assault everywhere. At the same time, teachers are being evaluated on the basis of their students' test scores, which cause outrage in the teaching profession. No one knows how to quantify good teaching. The Common Core, an effort that came from the governors of the states – federalism at its best - is meeting fierce resistance, particularly in red states where Tea Party groups find it an abomination. And I will add that, in my view, the Common Core is a superb set of educational objectives and guidelines that will do much to implement John MacMurray's call for education to produce thinkers and persons of character, "Literate, numerate and cultured." Charter schools, with some notable exceptions, are not proving to be the great success story that was hoped for. Likewise the positive effects of the new learning technologies are only apparent in schools with enough money to afford the equipment.

All of this started with No Child Left Behind, which was to be the great national effort to right the schools and get education back on track. After hundreds of billions of dollars spent on improvements since its enactment in 2002, positive results are hard to find. Widening the horizon, I agree with MacMurray that the last fifty years have seen steady decline.

My view is that the problems go beyond the schools. To me inequality of wealth and income across the land is probably the best place to begin a focus on education reform.

This leads to MacMurray's call for a national service program of either military or community service. This is a noble and enlightened idea because it addresses poverty too. It would do much to pull us together as a nation. But, in spite of the general welfare clause of the Constitution, surely a national service bill in Congress these days would last only seconds, "dead on arrival" as congressmen say. There would be a storm of opposition from left and right. Thinking along federalist lines, however, we should note the collection of service options run by the states and by nonprofits that offer service opportunities. Teach for America is one that has been extraordinarily successful. The Peace Corps still exists, and there is AmeriCorps too, as well as a number of other programs, particularly the Corporation for National and Community Service. These efforts need funding and emphasis and tax incentives and greater efforts to get young people to enroll. Service is not enough on the radar of young people today (except for those who want it on their college applications) and it should be. If we can't make service compulsory, we should at least make it something young people want to do and provide the opportunities.

So I say good for John MacMurray to keep all these issues out in front of us in his excellent essay.

Ned Rossiter

Ned Rossiter has a BA from Yale and an MEd from Harvard and has taught history and education for his entire career. He was head of the history department at Newton North High School outside of Boston for twenty years. After retirement from Newton in 2001, he has taught a graduate course on education theory and practice at Brandeis University and has supervised student teachers in the education program at Brandeis. He taught in Britain for three year at the Atlantic College in Wales and helped develop the International Baccalaureate diploma program, which is now offered worldwide.