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A NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION GOAL, AND HOW TO GET THERE

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The American public education "system" – a misnomer for the present concoction of 50 separate state systems that work to provide access to all American children to a course of free education through high school – is the subject of stormy debate. The sad fact is that 50 years of remediation have actually seen a deterioration of quality nationwide.

For some time now, our children have not been in the lead ranks as measured by the likes of The Program for International Assessment ("PISA test"). The test is administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to 15 year-olds in 65 countries, and plumbs their proficiency in reading, math, science and other core subjects. Nor can today's high school graduates demonstrate an in-depth understanding of American history or exhibit a moral compass that points to an ethical choice when individual interest and the common good conflict.

In these times of rapidly changing technology and intense global competition, American high school graduates must aspire to continue his/her education at the college level and/or enter the work force in a meaningful way. They must be adequately equipped to participate productively in the economic, political and cultural life of the country.

Consequently, the goal in educating our young people should be to produce in each an independent thinker, a person of character, who is literate, numerate and cultured, sufficient to allow for the actuality of social mobility and its possibility of realizing the "American dream". Furthermore, as all American children will be qualified to vote in their time, our Jacksonian democracy requires an educated electorate for sustenance to permit each person to serve both the nation and himself/herself by entering positively into the life of the nation. Globally, the goal must realize an overall public education system that will produce first in class high school graduates across all socio-economic classes, relative to students in all other countries, while also building to a no lesser standard, character evidencing moral sensibility and personal strength.

The overarching challenge is that while our Constitution dictates a decentralized education system, thus precluding a strictly national platform, we must nevertheless achieve an improved common education throughout the country. The Constitution gives the federal government no express power to legislate the education process, that power being reserved by the Tenth Amendment for the individual states to treat as they will. Since there is no American educational system writ large, "getting" to the national education goal involves the arduous bridging of individual state's goals.

We should, as a step in that direction, support the Common Core State Standards Initiative as a sensible means to put in focus the all-important element of curriculum, and are encouraged by its adoption by 43 states. Although each state has autonomous authority to implement these Standards, competition and sharing of best practices between the states ought to serve to drive nationwide collaboration and improvement.

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Charter schools, which introduce choice and thus competition, should have their place. Milton Friedman had it right – government monopoly of education, as a proposition, cannot prime the salutary effects of competition. To argue for monopoly that alternative schools would inevitably best the traditional public school, to its detriment, is to miss the point. Spoils are not meant to be apportioned to winners and losers alike.

In the same vein, consider the teaching profession in the United States today. Teaching warrants higher status, which to be achieved going forward requires a revised dynamic that both raises the professional bar for teachers and permits them greater teaching discretion in the class room. While unions should not be condemned for obtaining contract terms favorable to their membership, revisited negotiations must focus on obtaining a consensus on how to reward and support teacher performance and excellence.

Yet, public schooling, no matter how well devised and managed, cannot be expected to meet the needs of all of our children. In many cases, but especially in the case of students from low income families and inner city environments, virtually none of the necessary outside school reinforcements (e.g., cultural regard for education, parental direction and expectations of excellence in school, peer esteem for the outstanding student) can be expected to be brought to bear naturally.

Beyond the states' roles in education reform, federally funded education initiatives can fall within Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution, on the grounds that such expenditures are critical to producing an educated electorate across socio-economic lines and necessary for the welfare of a viable democracy. Consequently, federal support for innovative efforts to augment public education can help in achieving our national education goals. As an example, Legal Outreach of New York City, an elective extracurricular shadow school available to inner city children aspiring to a college education, could serve as a paradigm of high school reinforcement of a kind that could be scaled nation wide.

Additionally, if one of the guiding principles of the national education goal is to solve for a thinking polity fit for active life in a democracy, then it is essential that educational content have a civic component, including the practical element of field service. Currently, public service by young Americans is elective and the volunteers are comprised mostly of persons of like circumstances, which results in unrepresentative participation. A federal mandate should subject all high school graduates to public service for two years in a military or civilian capacity, in order to instill in Americans a sense of *res publica* appropriate to our republic, and as a tonic for civic morale.

In the end, continuing failure to improve the education of American children, broadly based, is not an option. Our "national" education goals are achievable within the parameters of the Constitution through efforts that promote common best practices between the states, foster competition in alternative ways of delivering education, institute required national service for all, and inject federal funding for proven supplementary education initiatives.

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