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The Education Gadfly

A Weekly Bulletin of News and Analysis from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

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I Celebrate Myself

The Education Gadfly is one of the most influential information sources in education. So sayeth *Education Week's* Research Center. Read more [here](#).

New from Fordham: Fresh Research on Curriculum Narrowing

American elementary students are required to spend more time in reading, math, and science class than their peers in other developed nations. But instructional time in history and science has eroded since the advent of standards-based reform--except in states that *test* those subjects. (What is tested indeed gets taught, if not necessarily learned.) Students in some cities (e.g., Chicago, Miami) spend the equivalent of eight fewer weeks in school per year than their peers in other cities (e.g., New York, Houston), forcing Windy City schools and their ilk to choose between basic skills and everything else. Those are the conclusions of three working papers released at Tuesday's *Beyond the Basics* conference. Read them--and view a webcast of the proceedings--[here](#).

This week on the *Education Gadfly Show*: [Yuan a podcast?](#)

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Guest Editorial

Relight the torch

Interest in classical humanism, the "traditional" liberal arts, has fallen sharply in recent decades, and nowhere more so than in American K-12 education.

Grounded in the worlds and ideas of the Greeks and Romans, and transmitted to us through the European middle ages and the Renaissance, classical humanism aims to teach students about the ideas, arts, persons, and events that constitute the "Western tradition." It's a model for the liberal arts that engages students with the intellectual and cultural traditions that gave rise to the culture and society they take for granted today. Yet it is also a model that has everything going against it.

The intellectual tradition of classical humanism carries a whiff of elitism, not to mention Eurocentricism. It was developed, transmitted, and evolved through society's upper strata, and undeniably centered in Europe and North America. Some of its most prominent modern advocates have died, such as Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Jacques Maritain, and Paul Gagnon. Several of today's most eloquent defenders, such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Diane Ravitch, are nearing retirement. Unfortunately, there are precious few among the young generation of scholars and educators to keep the classic liberal arts flame burning.

Other approaches to the liberal arts, however, are blazing away. Three are especially vigorous: process inquiry, cosmopolitanism, and activist academicism.

At its core, *Process Inquiry* is the belief that what matters most are the disciplinary methods of inquiry, which lead to students being able to solve problems, being creative, as well as adaptable and capable of learning new material quickly. Subject matter per se matters little--the process associated with it is what counts. The purest example of this view is Howard Gardner's.

Cosmopolitanism rests on the belief that students should be subjected to a wide range of civilizations, cultures, and artistic and intellectual traditions. In other words, young people should be educated as citizens of the world, and not limited to what Western Civilization has wrought. Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah are prominently associated with this line of thinking.

Activist Academicism wants to reinvent traditional liberal arts curricula to reflect certain recent innovations in the discipline that constitute them. So, they contend, the K-12 curriculum must be updated to incorporate labor history, ethnic studies, women's studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, ethnomathematics, critical theory, and microhistory. Gary Nash is a proponent of this view, but there are many, many others.

While classical humanism needs to reinforce its own place in the K-12 curriculum, those of us who support it should not look for fights to pick. These other approaches deserve respect. We should look to form alliances, not force schools to choose between traditional liberal arts and its competitors.

This is intellectually honest, because few partisans of rival views deny that study of the Western tradition ought to be *included* in any conception of liberal education, and few classical humanists deny the value of scholarly innovation, the sympathetic exposure of students to other traditions, or the importance of inquiry and method.

In other words, at the level of broad essentials, consensus can be found among advocates of competing models of liberal learning. But plenty of devilry lurks in the details, which is why alliances tend to break down.

How, then, might we accommodate reasonable differences among sophisticated and well-intended educators without watering everyone's model down to the incoherent muddle that characterizes today's K-12 curriculum? Fortunately, the introduction of charter schools and other forms of public school choice over the past 15 years has opened new possibilities. Entrepreneurial educators with strong educational convictions and deep concern for students and democracy have shown that there really are "multiple pathways" to becoming a reflective, productive, and empowered adult. As long as we can find ways to craft policies that ensure that *all* kids are schooled under *some* cogent and defensible conception of liberal learning, we can let a dozen flowers bloom. Done right, such policies could harness diverse talents in pursuit of broadly shared ends.

One way to accomplish this is to erect an accountability system for public education that ensures that schools do more than teach the basics without attempting to determine the content or formats of assessments used to gauge their success at it. For example, establish national standardized testing requirements in reading and math (perhaps with additional requirements in American Constitutional law and government, advanced writing, and basic science), combined with requirements that schools teach a broad general curriculum that conforms to some legitimate conception of liberal learning without specifying which. Enforce this mandate with a combination of on-site inspections and locally developed (and state-certified) assessments in history, geography, arts and humanities, civics, and

foreign language. This "tight-loose" framework would provide a nice balance between *pluribus* and *unum* in educational practice.

Still, these policies, while good for liberal education in general, will not ensure that the traditional liberal arts grow more robust. Classical liberal arts advocacy also needs fresh voices and new inspiration. Currently the most prominent organizations pressing for liberal education are associated with either conservative or libertarian politics. This reinforces an unfortunate tendency in American education on all sides to politicize curriculum, a tendency fundamentally at odds with the mind-expanding spirit of liberal learning.

America sorely needs a new organization that fills the void left by the demise of the Council for Basic Education, which closed in 2004, one that unifies those who support classical humanism without taking political sides. I suspect that every large high school and perhaps one in three elementary and middle schools in the country has at last one teacher with a passion for the traditional liberal arts. That represents a corps of thousands of educators laboring in isolation and dissatisfied with the national subject matter councils and other professional associations currently available to educators. Tap half of them, and you've got the beginnings of a new and potentially powerful professional network.

Classical humanism is as vibrant and relevant as ever. It continues to set standards for excellence in thought, art, and ethics, and the very liberal-democratic society we take for granted today is firmly rooted in its stories and ideas. It's time that committed educators stand up and relight the classical liberal arts flame.

This essay is drawn from the [background paper](#) that Dr. Ferrero prepared for Fordham's [Beyond the Basics](#) conference.

by [David Ferrero](#)

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News and Analysis

Homophily-phobia

"Homophily." The word means "love of the same," and it recently landed in the *New York Times Magazine's* 6th Annual Year in Ideas, listed directly after "Hidden-Fee Economy, The" and directly before "Human-Chimp Hybrids."

There's nothing particularly new about homophily; we've long known that, generally speaking, opposites *don't* attract. People tend to associate with others who are like them. But what drew the *Times Magazine's* attention is how markedly homophily has increased in the information age. Technology--often touted as the great integrator, the catalyst that will cause anachronistic walls of separation to crumble--is actually helping people separate themselves from others in myriad ways (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Similarity breeds connection, and despite there being no shortage of paeans to integration, people have a definite and observable inclination to self-segregate (see [here](#), for example). Unsurprisingly, schools conform to this trend. When parents are allowed educational choice to send their children to any number of schools, racial diversity doesn't seem to be a primary concern (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

When choosing either diversity of choice or creating diversity within those choices, people pick the former. And our increasing homophily is, in large part, related to the vast array of choices and niches society now offers (see [here](#)). Where choice exists in education, separation occurs--conservative parents tend to choose "back to basics" schools, while liberal parents choose "progressive" schools. And such values-based classrooms will often look racially, religiously, and culturally homogenous.

How to adapt? It's a question currently racking the brains of nine Supreme Court justices and countless scholars. But beyond the legal murkiness, one thing is crystal clear: If the United States is intent on protecting "integration" and "diversity" in public schooling despite the forces working against them (i.e., people's preferences), it's undeniable that government paternalism will need to grow even more muscular. Not a positive proposition.

Further, while homophilic tendencies have always been strong, the nature of society's segregation is changing. Americans have long self-segregated by race, a separation still visible in everything from neighborhoods to middle school cafeterias. But 21st century America is also seeing socioeconomic classes grow more firmly stratified (see [here](#)). Which leads one to think that schools, rather than concentrating only or overmuch on racial integration, will need to start worrying about [economic integration, too](#) ([some](#) have already done so). How very convoluted things become.

But what if our schools, aware of people's tendencies toward homophily, decided to stop fighting against the tide and chose, instead, to ignore it? What if our schools devoted their efforts toward creating the best parts of integrated classrooms inside racially isolated ones? They would find that the oft-touted benefits of integration (the ones we can measure, anyway) don't stem from arranging a classroom cornucopia of races, classes, etc. as much as they do from creating environments that reflect values and cultures associated with higher socioeconomic rungs.

KIPP does it (as do many other charter schools). Its schools are about as racially and socio-economically isolated as schools can be. But KIPP fosters in its classrooms a "culture of achievement" that replicates those found in pricey private schools. Not only do KIPP students achieve academic success, but no one seriously thinks that the schools' graduates are harmed because their classrooms weren't "diverse."

On the other hand, many students are *absolutely* harmed by attending integrated schools where no culture of achievement exists. And nobody seriously suggests that America has done well by those kids just because we've created for them classes with the right racial or socioeconomic variety.

The culture of a school matters, especially to youngsters who are developing the life habits they'll carry with them down the road. And while diversity can be wonderful when it occurs, variety offers little when it's couched in a culture of low achievement and low expectations.

If the societal trend is toward more homophily and crafting evermore niches, public acceptance of

artificially integrated schools seems unlikely. It's far wiser for policymakers and leaders to work within people's preferences, rather than work against them.

by [Liam Julian](#)

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Recommended Reading

Compulsory education

Spokane business teacher Scott Carlson doesn't think the Washington Education Association (WEA), of which he is *not* a member, should be able to raid his paycheck to fund its political causes without his permission. Oddly, the Washington state Supreme Court disagrees. The court found that the potential benefits to 4,000 non-WEA member teachers who sued (to regain individual sums of \$50 to \$200) were relatively small compared to the "heavy administrative burden" of requiring the WEA to gain written approval from each teacher before using his or her money for union-backed politics (in other words, to follow the law). The case will be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court in January. But while we wait for that verdict, consider: The WEA's mission has something to do with representing the interests and voices of Washington's teachers--why does that apply only to teachers whose political views jibe with the union's? And why should Scott Carlson and his peers be compelled to associate with the WEA in the first place? Maybe he can go teach in a union-free charter school. Oh wait, the WEA already used his money to kill that idea, too.

"[State of the Unions](#)," by Stephen Moore, *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2006

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Where's the teach?

Last week, Gadfly noted Philadelphia Mayor John Street's [bold strategy](#) of threatening parents of truant students with jail time. Forget the students--what about the teachers? According to the school district, a staggering 6 percent of its 11,000 public school teachers (660 of Philadelphia's finest) are absent each day. When confronted with the number, union executive Jerry Jordan pointed out that it's actually "remarkable how good our teacher attendance is, particularly in light of building conditions. Many buildings are quite old, and falling down." So teachers stay home on days when they expect their schoolhouses to crumble? District officials, however, think truant teachers are motivated less by fear of falling bricks than by the details of their contracts. Philadelphia teachers who don't use all their sick days can cash them out at retirement for 25 percent of their value, a low percentage that, school leaders say, creates an incentive for teachers to use all the sick days they have each year. Their theory's only problem--most private sector jobs don't allow employees to cash out unused sick days for *any* percentage. Time for a crackdown. Maybe Mayor Street could lock up teachers who play hooky alongside the city's irresponsible parents--a new take on parent-teacher night, for sure.

["Teachers are truant, too, reform commissioner says,"](#) by Kristen A. Graham, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 7, 2006

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Miss fortune

Too bad Jimmy Carter is busy deflecting charges that he's anti-Israel and a plagiarizer--his prowess as an election observer was recently needed in Roseville, Minnesota. By most accounts, Jasmine White should be student council president of Central Park Elementary in said town. The eleven-year-old White beat her challenger, William Thomas, after handing out fortune cookies containing the message, "Vote for Jasmine for President." But Thomas's parents complained that such tactics were unfair, and after school administrators conferred with the other candidates, an Education Sector-style [co-presidency](#) was declared. (Of course, we know how [these things](#) turn out.) White's parents were rightly furious, and they pointed out that the fortune cookie campaigning had been cleared with school officials. And further, they argued, because of a technicality in the school's election laws, Thomas wasn't *even eligible* to run for president. All reasonable points, all to no avail. But young Jasmine didn't seem too bothered. She told reporters, resignedly, "I'm still kind of upset about it, but I think that they won't change it since it's been like two months." Probably she's right--it's time for the healing to begin.

["Hey, kids, welcome to democracy,"](#) by Doug Belden, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 8, 2006

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The Education Gadfly Show

Yuan a podcast?

This week, Mike and Rick demand more pledging, less union meddling, and longer speeches from Bill Gates. Our interview with Graham Down about liberal arts curricula is real, and it's spectacular, and Education News of the Weird is all about One Teacher's Left Behind. Fish rot from the head, we're told. Click [here](#) to listen on your computer (no iPod required--this link will play through any music software on your computer, including Windows Media Player or RealPlayer). To subscribe to this podcast, or to get more information about how podcasts work, click [here](#).

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Short Reviews of New Reports and Books

Tough Choices for Tough Times: Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce

National Center on Education and the Economy
2006

In the specialized universe of blue-ribbon panel reports on reforming U.S. education, this new planet gets an honors grade. Released today by a commission chaired by Charles B. Knapp and containing such eminences as Dick Riley, John Engler, Joel Klein, Rod Paige, Tom Payzant, and Bill Brock, it's mostly the work of Marc Tucker's National Center on Education and the Economy and, loosely, the successor to that center's influential 1990 report on skills needed by the American workforce. Sixteen years later, the topic is worth revisiting. The world economy has changed dramatically and so have the challenges that the nation and its workforce face. This report does an exemplary job of displaying and explaining both the challenges and the changes that need to be made--ten big recommendations--and painting a vivid portrait of what America would look like if we actually do those things. It's no simple laundry list; the recommendations are tightly linked and closely integrated. They include developing standards, assessments, and curricula that reflect today's needs and tomorrow's requirements, and they span and amalgamate several different reform strategies, drawing the essence from each. They're big and bold. No single faction in American education will like all of them--a universal level of unhappiness is one definition of consensus--and that's why implementation is going to prove a huge challenge. But this report could turn out to be a fit successor to *A Nation at Risk*. You should [read it](#). Before doing so, you might want to read what Mr. Flat-world himself, the *New York Times*'s Thomas Friedman, [has to say](#) about it.

by [Chester E. Finn, Jr.](#)

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Influence: A Study of the Factors Influencing Education Policy

Christopher B. Swanson and Janelle Barlage
Editorial Projects in Education Research Center
December 2006

The modern Thomas B. Fordham Foundation turns ten this year, and as part of our obligatory navel-gazing we set out to determine whether any of our research studies have had much influence on public policy. Regardless of the outcome, we thought we might learn something from the blockbusters of the past decade. For example, were the most influential studies also the best ones or did something else explain their prominence? So we contracted with the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, publishers of *Education Week*, to find out. They surveyed a host of education insiders, analyzed citations in academic journals, and tallied media hits. They computed scores across those three categories and identified 13 studies that stood head and shoulders above the rest. The list is indisputably eclectic. The studies range from large-scale assessments (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS]) to evaluations of specific interventions (class-size reduction and vouchers) to commission reports (National Reading Panel, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future), to data analyses (Education Trust on teacher quality, Jay Greene on graduation rates). Alas, no Fordham studies made the cut, though we had a hand in the American Diploma Project, which did (tied for last place). The

Research Center also queried insiders about the relative influence of organizations, individuals, and information sources in education. (Here we fared somewhat better.) The results are interesting if not too surprising; Bill Gates and his billions wield enormous influence. Kati Haycock and her colleagues at Education Trust have dominated the education policy debate in recent years (think: No Child Left Behind). Perhaps you [disagree](#). View the report [here](#) and let the parlor games begin.

by [Michael J. Petrilli](#)

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Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2006

Edited by Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill

Center on Reinventing Public Education's National Charter Research Project

December 2006

This set of essays on the state of U.S. charter schools is the second in a series from Paul Hill's Center on Reinventing Public Education. The first essay, by researchers Paul Teske and Robert Reichardt, combats the stereotype of charter parents as "ill-informed consumers who are led unwittingly to charter schools." Teske and Reichardt found that charter parents were in fact more likely than their non-charter counterparts to choose a school based on academic factors and that they were ultimately more satisfied with their chosen schools. The next essay presents lessons from Dayton, Ohio (where 1 in 4 students attends a charter school), for school districts struggling with competition from charters. Christine Campbell and Deborah Warnock suggest that threatened districts should offer parents "new options within the traditional district system," such as magnet schools; reach out to parents through advertising; and take oversight and accountability more seriously. Essay three, a slightly too-optimistic look at the age-old battle between charter advocates and teacher unions, essentially reproduces [this paper](#) by Hill, Lydia Rainey, and Andrew Rotherham, which, incidentally, was [lovingly lampooned](#) in a recent podcast interview. The final four essays all consider "how government institutions responsible for judging the performance of charter schools can do their jobs fairly and effectively." Among the suggestions is that we "move beyond the current single-minded preoccupation with test scores" to assess charters on other merits, such as safety, teacher quality, and exposure to content, to name a few. Essay five also offers suggestions for districts to better manage charter authorization. On balance, the collection is balanced, even if no single piece is. But in the world of charter school research, balance tends to rest in the beholder's eye. Read the report [here](#).

by [Coby Loup](#)

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Charter High Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap

Innovations in Education Series
U.S. Department of Education
October 2006

This booklet looks at reforming high school via chartering. Starting with a list of 400 secondary charter schools that are meeting achievement goals under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the authors culled it down to eight high-performing schools that have graduated at least one cohort of students, most of whom went on to college or work. Two-day site visits were made to help uncover what makes these schools succeed. The findings are presented in two parts. The first describes six common traits that drive success at these seemingly heterogeneous schools. For example, all focus on college prep, are mission driven, team up with parents and community and hold themselves accountable. The second section profiles the individual schools, showing how the common traits play out in day-to-day practice. Those interested in high school reform won't find any sweeping policy correctives in these pages, but they will find some excellent models of high school education in the charter sector. Read the report [here](#).

by [Martin A. Davis, Jr.](#)

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Announcements

Potential interns, report for duty

Fordham seeks a winter intern to start work at our [Washington, D.C., office](#) as soon as possible. We're looking for a savvy person interested in education reform who possesses a willingness to work hard in a fast-paced policy environment. He or she should be a top-notch writer, a team player, and proficient in witty repartee. If you start soon enough, you can come to our [holiday party](#). See [here](#) for more.

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About Us

The Education Gadfly is published weekly (ordinarily on Thursdays), with occasional breaks, by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Regular contributors include Martin A. Davis, Jr., Chester E. Finn, Jr., Liam Julian, Sarah Kim, Jennifer Leischer, Coby Loup, Eric Osberg, and Michael J. Petrilli. Have something to say? Email us at letters@edexcellence.net. Would you like to be spared from the Gadfly? Email thegadfly@edexcellence.net with "unsubscribe gadfly" in the text of your message. You are welcome to forward Gadfly to others, and from our website you can also email individual articles. If you have been forwarded a copy of Gadfly and would like to subscribe, you may either email thegadfly@edexcellence.net with "subscribe gadfly" in the text of the message or sign up through our website, www.edexcellence.net. To read archived issues or obtain other reviews of reports and books, go to www.edexcellence.net and click on the Education Gadfly link.

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