



[Education](#)

[Comments](#) 2 | [Recommend](#)  1

Julia Steiny: Loss of a common standard affects education and the republic

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, June 27, 2010



America was founded as a nation of different peoples held together by the idea of Democracy and the primacy of the Common Good.

In an age when Congress itself is paralyzed by partisan interests, let us celebrate the Fourth of July by revisiting the democratic ideals on which the country was founded. And let's remember that our Founding Fathers believed that the only force that would maintain their intrinsically precarious democracy was education — common knowledge and skills taught in Common Schools.

Toward the beginning of his latest book, "The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools," E.D. Hirsch Jr. recounts the famous story of Benjamin Franklin leaving the Constitutional Convention of 1787. A woman asked, "Well, Doctor, what have we got?" Franklin replied, "A Republic, Madam, if you can keep it."

Even in the 18th century, immigrants poured into our then-new nation, so the Founders' challenge was to design and teach a practical, community-first faith that could encompass all of what Hirsch calls the "tribes," separated by religion, language, cultural habits or nations of origin. Tribes are naturally self-interested. So to prevent any one set of partisan interests from becoming powerful enough to dictate to others, democracy needed, says Hirsch, "a special new brand of citizens who, unlike the citizens of Rome and other failed republics, would subordinate their local interests to the common good."

The Founders were not concerned that students become technically proficient or job-ready. Common knowledge and skills would include spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic and American history — knowledge and skills that would fit them for their public life as a future citizen.

A half-century later, in a speech titled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," Abraham Lincoln expressed the idea this way:

“Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap; let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books and in Almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.”

Democracy’s common laws were to be a secular religion, able to hold together the disparate religions, among other human differences.

In the 1880s, the newly composed Pledge of Allegiance to the flag replaced chapel as the morning ritual in public schools.

Hirsch, also the author of the bestseller “Cultural Literacy,” notes that at the beginning of the 20th century, American education began to lose its way. A needless, destructive split separated the common curriculum from a “child-centered” education that nourished a love of learning. These are not mutually exclusive at all. Modern technology and techniques can make any learning exciting, including the history and skills our forefathers hoped would teach children an allegiance to their larger community. But over the 20th century, specific content slipped slowly from the curriculum, leaving little common knowledge.

Back in the 1950s, baby boomers (like me) learned the happy story of the Thanksgiving feast shared by the Pilgrims and the Indians. Good teachers beefed up the lesson with interesting details, timelines and pictures to guide us to the historical period, the religious reasons the Pilgrims made the dangerous journey, and the place on the map where they landed (far away from my hometown). The story only became nuanced later in our schooling.

Hirsch observes that in the 1980s, people began to draw away from our commonality and into constituencies — gender, race, religious and national origins. While culturally important, Hirsch calls the era of ROOTS the “neo-tribalism,” that eventually grew into the shrill partisanship now dominating modern public discourse. Cynicism grew like mold around the pie-in-the-sky ideal of the common good.

Ideologues became offended by the Thanksgiving story, because it omitted the admittedly serious downside to the Native Americans of the coming of the white man. Educators became fearful of offending any group. But no parent wanted their small child subjected to an Indian-oppression story at holiday time. So Thanksgiving morphed into a generic food event with no historical content at all.

The simple Thanksgiving story isn’t a lie; it just isn’t the whole story, as we know history unfolded. But it is a foundational myth, as Hirsch says, “to achieve commonality of language and knowledge and a shared loyalty to the public good.”

By scrubbing the curriculum of anything that does not meet political correctness, we fail to teach our children about the democratic faith. And by doing so, we invite them to take our freedom and heritage for granted. American children need to understand that cultivating the common good allows each of us to thrive as a unique, even eccentric individual.

Hirsch says, “Students need to leave school with a good understanding of the civic principles under which the United States operates and with an emotional commitment to making this political experiment continue to work.”

By all means, help the students become job-ready. But let it be secondary. Schools and public officials, like labor and management, would do well to model and teach the mutual benefits of holding the entire community's common welfare as the primary value.

It's the American way, or should be.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults for government agencies and schools; she is co-director of Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.