

The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies

Volume 71
Number 1 *Volume 71 No. 1 (2010)*

Article 2

2018

Review of "The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools"

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Recommended Citation

Seghi, Lauren (2018) "Review of "The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools"," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 71 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol71/iss1/2

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Review of E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Our schools in America are in trouble. American students fall behind their counterparts in other countries in reading, math, and SAT scores. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a longstanding advocate for schools and former professor of education at the University of Virginia, enlightens the educational world with his look at how American schools have failed us and what we need to do to fix them. His combination of both history and cognitive psychology is refreshing and interesting. Hirsch concludes that there needs to be a change in our educational system by instituting a state-by-state early grade core curriculum replacing the anti-curriculum movement and argues that "it is the duty of American schools to educate competent American citizens" (p. 65).

As Hirsch explains, schools have always been an important part of our nation's history. The early founders "saw schools as the central and main hope for the preservation of democratic ideals and the endurance of the nation as a republic" (p. 3). The most pressing issue facing American schools today is the students' lack of knowledge. Students simply have not obtained that essential knowledge needed to help them succeed. To tackle these problems, Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation, which created schools who use a core curriculum and have been fairly successful across the country (p. 13). Unfortunately, the author tends to return to the success of his foundation throughout the book as his only major solution to the issues plaguing our schools.

At one point, Hirsch compares the community and child-centered schools, the latter which has been most detrimental despite its name. According to the author, the anti-curriculum movement took hold between the 1930s and 1950s (p. 41). The author adds that there was a sharp decline in verbal and math SAT scores following the implementation of this particular movement, which he does not consider to be coincidental (p. 41). In conjunction with the anti-curriculum movement and child-centered activities, through a principle known as providentialism, it is believed that students will develop both academic skill and social integration, an idea that Hirsch argues has been no more successful than a core curriculum (p. 46). As the author explains, there has been little dissent in changing the anti-curriculum movement because of its own "sense of righteousness" (p. 50). Future teachers are themselves indoctrinated with an anti-curriculum model while in their training which has only extended this vicious cycle of an uneducated youth. Furthermore, there has been a lack of bi-partisan agreement in government leading Hirsch to argue for the states to adopt their own core curriculum (p. 55). Likewise, Hirsch argues that today's students are unable to make informed, reasoned decisions about the world around them. For Hirsch, only the founding principles of our nation and citizen-making can solve this problem.

Language, Hirsch explains, is the most critical component in sharing the basic knowledge lacking in our schools today (p. 94). The anti-curriculum movement once focused on teaching reading using "the whole-word method" where students translated written words into sounds (p. 95). This practice failed horribly and has yet to be fixed. Throughout my own experience in classrooms, I would agree with Hirsch that our students simply do not know how to spell and do not seem to be improving in their practice. This,

as Hirsch explains, is another major issue plaguing schools today as well (p. 96). Sadly, this same issue faces not only elementary and high school teachers but college professors as well (p. 97). Hirsch believes that this very problem is due to the fact that there was a resolution issued in the 1970s called *Students' Right to their Own Language* which allowed students to use dialects comfortable to them individually, including Ebonics (p. 98). Hirsch argues for a re-introduction of the standardization of the English language, "one of the firmest and most stable realities of American life" (p. 99). It is the job of the teachers to educate their students on how to use this language in every day life (p. 108-114). The teachers can then focus on teaching a standard knowledge (p. 114-118).

In Chapter Five, "Competence and Equality," Hirsch again places the blame on the anti-curriculum movement for the two achievement gaps (p. 124). In his study, Hirsch contends that the gap in scores among different races has nothing to do with their socio-economic status or genetic or social makeup but instead is an educational problem (p. 128). I would counter that there the lack of education and understanding of basic knowledge is directly related to the fact that the families of these students cannot afford to live in wealthy areas and are stuck with attending schools with few resources. Hirsch believes that his Core Knowledge schools would help to alleviate this problem as well (p. 128). To support his point, the author writes of Ridgeview Classical School in Fort Collins, Colorado, which has had success in narrowing the achievement gaps (pp. 145-146).

Hirsch ends his book with some advice for educators on how to help students succeed on standardized reading tests (p. 153). He suggests that students focus on comprehension instead of straight reading skills and have the students do three things on these tests: summarize, classify and find the main idea (p. 160). To pull it altogether, Hirsch reminds the reader of the importance of preparing our youngest students to succeed in the future. With sources ranging from cognitive studies to SAT and reading scores to historical monographs, *The Making of Americans* draws in a wide range of readers. While high school teachers might relate to the problems discussed by Hirsch, this book might be the most useful in the hands of elementary school teachers whose duty it is to push for a common core curriculum nationwide. It is an interesting read for educational historians as well, who would be treated to a very detailed synopsis of the history of our schools and how their roles have changed since our nation's founding. Although this is a rather depressing study of the status of our schools currently, Hirsch helps to inspire others to work together to create a solution to fixing our educational system. There is a quote by an unknown author that goes "A teacher's purpose is not to create students in his own image, but to develop students who can create their own image." In the end E.D. Hirsch, Jr. would agree that it is our responsibility as teachers to not only educate our students on basic knowledge of history, writing or math in the classroom but to influence them to be competent, intelligent human beings who can make reasoned choices about the world on their own.

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