

The Role of the Federal Government in Education and Consideration of Common Core Standards and a National Curriculum

Paper for the League of Women Voters

Christopher B. Nelson, President, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland

September 10, 2011

Thank you for the invitation to join you in your participation in the national League's Education Study. My understanding is that I am to address the Scope of this Study, which has been defined for you as looking at the role of the federal government in public education, from pre-K through Grade 12. This would include the history, funding and equity issues under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, originally authorized in 1970, later reauthorized as NCLB, No Child Left Behind in 2001), and the use of common core standards and assessments which are required for participation in federal grant programs.

First a disclaimer: I have only a rudimentary understanding of the Core Standards. I have no experience in the classroom or in administrative affairs involving education at the pre-K to Grade 12 levels, except that of my own as I grew up and that of my children. I have no degree in education or public policy. You should take these limitations of mine into account – but you may also recognize in my remarks a certain independence that this lack of background gives me.

A Little History and Context

Notwithstanding that the education of our nation's young has been left largely to our local school districts and our local and state governments, the federal government has long had a stake in the education of its citizenry. From the Land Ordinance of 1785 through the Land Grant Act of 1862, the federal government has coupled the granting of federal land to the states with the granting of funds to support federal educational purposes. An office of education was first established some 144 years ago to collect data that would help the states establish effective school systems.

Then, of course, there was the GI Bill in 1944 which provided funds to support the education of returning veterans after the end of World War II, and later, the Educational and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that established funding of federal aid to the disadvantaged, which has become a Christmas tree on which to hang countless federal regulatory ornaments! And many more.

In 1980, a newly created Cabinet level Department of Education was established for the express purpose of promoting "student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access." The Department now boasts 4,200 employees and a \$63 billion budget, and distributes hundreds of billions more in federal student grants and loans.

Until very recently, however, the federal government reserved certain key responsibilities to local authorities: the determination of what should be taught, how it should be taught, and by whom – also, largely, to whom. This limitation on federal powers has been confirmed in law. But what the federal government may not do directly, it has often found a way to do indirectly.

No Child Left Behind was an aggressive entry by the federal government into the traditional locus of control of educational policy with respect to learning standards. It set annual progress goals for all schools and imposed severe penalties on schools that failed to meet those progress goals, including a requirement of 100% proficiency by 2014 --- and it placed consequent

pressure on the teachers who could lose their positions if their school were to be placed in a position of non-compliance and subject to reorganization by the state. This law was passed out of concern that this country was losing ground internationally on the test performance of its students, AND that the responsibility for this performance rested with our schools and our teachers.

Common Core Standards and Assessments

In the midst of this national concern over the quality of our public schools, two national organizations (the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers) established The Common Core Standards Initiative in 2010, so that “all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in post-secondary education and the workforce.” Most states have adopted the Standards.

The Core Standards are designed to tell us what kinds of skills our students should have acquired by a certain grade level. They read like the following: “Demonstrate command of conventions of standard English grammar...”; “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts...”; “Analyze how a particular sentence ... fits into the structure of a text”; “Trace and evaluate...”; “Gather and conduct..”; “Analyze and compare..”; “Recognize and explain...” They do not prescribe how this is to be done in the classroom, leaving that to the teachers. Hence, there is no effort to tie the standards to any curriculum or other ways to bring learning to life in the classroom. In this sense, they are quite dry and lifeless, and sound all rather alike, mostly forgettable. But they have the virtue of leaving the teaching matter to the teachers, where it belongs.

Assessments are a different matter. These are tests intended to measure those skills that students are expected to have learned – in other words, to test whether the Common Core Standards have been met. They are applied nationally, at certain grade levels, and are used to measure whether schools are succeeding in teaching their students the expected skills, punishing those that are not progressing as expected toward 100% proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

It did not take long for others, like the Albert Shanker Institute, to offer the missing ingredient, proposing a national curriculum that would help our students to acquire the skills needed to meet the standards. (You know, when I talk like this, I feel like I am describing how a car is assembled with an educated student as the good-working end-product.) But there are many curricula out there that offer lots of good suggestions for a plan of study, reading lists, and interesting learning material. Many of you are aware of the International Baccalaureate Program in several Anne Arundel schools, a rigorous program studied around the world with a good track record. There is also a curriculum put together by the Core Knowledge Foundation that gets high marks, also various versions of the Paideia Program, and reading lists and study guides from the Great Books Foundation, to name a few.

To add a little fuel to the flagging efforts of states and school districts to score better on these national tests, the Department of Education two years ago inaugurated The Race to the Top, a federal program that provides strong financial incentives to the states to adopt a program that would aggressively shut down underperformers and reward the good performers – all as measured by the test scores of the students. Race to the Top is a \$4.35 billion competition designed to spur reforms in K-12 education. It is funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. States applying for massive grants under this law were assessed for their commitment to and success in implementing certain educational policies, including

performance-based standards for teachers and principals, nationwide standards of compliance, promotion of charter schools, and computerization of the classroom. The Race encourages firing of teachers and shutting of schools whose students fail over time to show sufficient progress or proficiency on the tests.

I'd like us to keep in mind that there is a distinction between the national efforts of non-federal government entities and actions of the federal government. For example, the Core Standards were established by a national, non-federal, group of organizations, without the authority of law. The Race to the Top is a federal incentive program designed to funnel huge sums of money from a federal agency to the states whose schools had better toe the line to meet federal departmental aspirations on student achievement and classroom conduct. It is formally a voluntary program. States do not need to apply. But in this country, financial incentives have the effective power of law.

Before looking at the effectiveness of these national and federal programs, I'd like to step back and ask a prior question, one that I suspect all of us in this room have some well earned opinions about.

How Do Students Learn?

Learning is an activity that is fired by a desire to know. For it to flourish, a deep love of learning must be cultivated. We all know this from personal experience, from looking into the eyes of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and from talking to them about the things they are learning. We know how difficult it is to learn from being lectured at, and we certainly know that none of us love to take tests for their own sake. As the farmers among us know, if you want to fatten the cow, you don't go out and buy a scale. You feed it! And if you want it to eat, you feed it the things that it will desire to eat and will make it better and fatter.

And how should we go about this feeding of our students? Every good teacher knows the answer to this, but each has his or her own special bag of tricks, tools of the trade, examples and games, devices to encourage and enliven the classroom. The goal of each teacher is to find a way to help the students build an honest curiosity about the things they are studying and acquire practice in shared inquiry with other students studying these things. Our students need to find ways of making the education their own, and their teachers need to help them identify those things that will grab hold of the imagination of their students to get them going on a project they can call their own, something they can be proud of. Teachers who are engaged in the project of learning with a student do not need a national skills test result to tell them that the student is learning. A far better measure would be the brightness of the light in the students' eyes, or the eagerness of the student to volunteer an answer or undertake an independent search for an answer to a question he or she might have. Of course, we know that eagerness alone is insufficient and that a certain amount of drilling and instruction will be necessary to ensure that basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic are learned.

For a student to develop a love of learning, it helps to have good and beautiful things to study and to have teachers who can help them come to see what is good or beautiful in those things. It requires a kind of intelligent flexibility for the teacher to recognize the kind of knowing that will encourage each individual student to pursue a question that belongs to the student. In other words, it requires flexibility to depart freely from a "lesson plan"! This requires that we invest in helping to develop and sustain a group of well educated teachers. They too need to find things they will love to learn in order to set the right example in class. We need to invest in our teachers before we rush to fire them; we need to invest in the things that encourage learning in

our schools and classrooms, not shut them down. And to the extent we can support it, we need to invest in ways to keep the parents engaged in their students' learning because we know, and studies have shown, that concerned, involved parents are extremely helpful in developing and encouraging their children's desire to learn.

And finally, promoting a lifelong love of learning requires the development of certain intellectual virtues in our students that will help them free themselves to pursue their learning to its best effect: courage in asking questions, caution in forming opinions, candor about their shortcomings, attentiveness to the speech of others, industry in preparation, and meticulousness in expression. These virtues are best encouraged in our youngest learners because they will help them to learn better as they progress through their school years. Teachers who possess these virtues will be more likely to help students acquire them. Better that our teachers serve as good examples of learners than as authorities of what needs to be learned. This too requires an investment in teacher development.

We need only look to our nation's Declaration of Independence for guidance on our educational public policy. If we want our citizens to have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we ought to make every reasonable effort to find ways of encouraging the love of learning for its own sake, which is the kind of fulfillment we call happiness. We need not then worry that the by-products of this activity are worthy of our humanity: finding a vocation that will sustain us, and exercising the duties of citizenship to protect these freedoms. These will follow like day the night.

Now, back to our Common Core Standards and High Stakes Testing!

How Are We Doing With These Federal Education Reforms? Are They Working?

Let me begin by asking two questions:

- (1) Does this federal policy serve the ends of a better educated citizenry? And
- (2) Have these programs actually served to promote federal public policy?

As to the first question, whether these federal public programs promote good learning, I think they do not. My reasons are as follows:

1. Student test scores depend on what students do, on the effort they expend, on the regularity of their attendance in class, on the support they get at home and the educational expectations of their parents, and perhaps especially on their socio-economic status and family income. Furthermore, test scores go up or down from one year to the next depending on the composition of the class, irrespective of the teacher. Of course, we all know how the dynamic of the class changes with its composition. What works with one class will not work with another. We have to recognize that our classrooms are filled with human beings who do not all respond to the same things in the same ways.
2. To hold teachers accountable for things beyond their control is both irresponsible and demoralizing to many sound teachers. (In this observation and in many others here, I find myself turning frequently to the judgment and advice of Diane Ravitch, a well known and frequently published professor of Education at NYU, with whom I most often agree.) How can we have come from seeing teachers as respected and underpaid members of

3. Teachers are teaching to limited and limiting tests; testing to improve mathematical and reading skills has the effect of causing teachers to teach to those tests, narrowing greatly our expectation of what we would hope our young would learn from their education: history; geography; government; politics; arts; physical, biological and social sciences; music; world cultures; philosophy; and so much more.
4. Last January, our President stated that he wanted Americans to be better educated, encouraging creativity, innovation, and imagination. He wanted teachers to be treated with respect. But his Race to the Top program undermines those very goals and reinforces No Child Left Behind by giving extravagant monetary rewards for doing what this Administration favors: increasing the number of privately managed charter schools, which on balance have not outperformed the publicly managed schools; awarding merit pay to teachers whose students' test scores increase; and improving low-scoring schools by firing principals and teachers, or else closing schools or handing them over to private management.
5. We hear that we should be raising our student scores to those of other high performing nations like Finland or Japan, while ignoring that those countries not only have more homogeneous societies with a strong work ethic but also that they have not achieved their high scores by high stakes testing. Instead, they have invested in nurturing teachers, teacher development, and in strong curricular offerings, i.e., good content. (Diane Ravitch, "Invitation to a Dialogue: Fixing the Schools" NYT letter to the editor, July 6, 2011)
6. Focus on testing for proficiency in reading and math to the exclusion of everything else may produce the very populace we most fear, adults so narrowly educated that they can never meet the needs of a world that requires much more. With boundaries among the disciplines vanishing, with job requirements and needs changing rapidly, we need citizens prepared for change, prepared to adapt to jobs that do not yet exist, prepared to enter an unknown world with a kind of fearless determination to undertake whatever is required to succeed. We will need skills of inquiry to enter a world we cannot yet even envision.
7. Have our leaders forgotten that our scores today are not much different than they were 40 and 50 years ago, when we ranked in the lower quartile internationally on such tests then too? In the first international tests in math in 1964, 8th and 12th graders scored in the bottom quartile; in the '70s, we were dead last in the sciences. (See Diane Ravitch, "Failing Schools' Fallacy", The Daily, op-ed 4/30/11) We worry about our ability to compete in the global marketplace. Yet, I wonder what causes us to think that the strength of our economy has anything to do with our performance on these tests? I even wonder whether there is an inverse correlation between high test scores on these exams and the intelligence necessary for a free economy to flourish.
8. Teachers are only human. They will teach to the test despite their best instincts if they have reason to fear punishment if test scores are bad or to reap a reward if those scores are good. I hear from some that they teach to the test because they must, even when they see such high stakes testing as counter-productive to good learning. I remember my 11th grade chemistry teacher, Mr. Rondeau, who opened the year by telling us we all

9. Whatever happened to the concern for an education in the art of being human, which requires more than a focus on math and reading? Do we imagine that our teachers could be replaced by computers that could provide exercises, guidance, tests, and scores? We are repelled by such an idea – FOR A REASON. We know it could never work, and studies have shown us that the best wired classrooms with the most sophisticated electronic support have had virtually no effect on overall test performance. This was reported in the NY Times just last week.
10. Instead of promoting innovation, creativity and imagination, our obsession with raising narrow test scores discourages these things. Students learn to pick the right answer on a multiple choice test, while being penalized for thinking independently. In law school, I remember hearing the story of the number one graduate of Columbia Law failing the bar exam, because her responses to the bar questions did not fit the law as it was then written. The way I heard the story, her arguments became the law of the land when the next several years' Supreme Court decisions came down. Our primary public purpose is to sustain our democratic republic. How can we do this without an education that causes us to exercise some real independence of mind?

Well, you can tell that I do not think much of the relationship between the national concern for the improvement of education and the federal efforts to accomplish this. This is not to suggest there is no place for testing in our schools. They serve as valuable diagnostic tools to help us improve both teaching and learning, and help us know where we need to focus our attention as teachers. And of course I would hope our teachers in the classroom would continue to insist that some learning take place and to fashion their own classroom tests to help insure that it is happening.

However, we still need to address the second question, whether the keystone federal programs are achieving the aims they seek. That is, even if we were to agree that the federal efforts were right minded, are they succeeding? It would seem that they are not:

1. National scores since No Child Left Behind provide sufficient evidence. In a 2010 study by the Economic Policy Institute, students were found to have improved their test scores more rapidly in the decade before NCLB than in the period since, and these improvements were tiny, in the neighborhood of 1 point. U.S. scores on International exams to test more complex skills dropped between 2000 and 2006, even while state and local test scores were climbing. (EPI Briefing Paper "Problems With the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate their Teachers", Aug. 29, 2010.)
2. Only last Tuesday, I read a report in the Health section of the Times that many child development experts say that "the ever-growing emphasis on academic performance and test scores means that many children are not developing the life skills [of] self-control, motivation, focus, and resilience, which are far better predictors of long-term success than high grades." (Tara Parker Pope, "School Curriculum Falls Short on Bigger Lessons", NYT, September 6, 2011)

3. We have already seen enough evidence to make us sick to read it, but high stakes testing has led to cheating, gaming the system, inflating scores, and narrowing the curriculum. It is hard to excuse bad teacher behavior, but NCLB has provided rewards for it – at least until the bad guys are caught.

Enough!

My advice going forward would be that we encourage a retreat from high stakes testing, focus on saving our schools rather than shutting them down, invest in teacher development programs, work on job creation to reduce poverty, and support efforts to strengthen the family in our most impoverished areas. We should continue to strive to provide equal opportunity for our citizens to grow and learn. None of these are new ideas; they are undoubtedly expensive and we have experienced failure with some, certainly not all, of our prior efforts. That should not deter us from backing away from a program that is having so little good effect on learning while breaking the backbone of a public school system that has had a lot of success in most parts of the country for more than a century.

What positive steps might we take? I would invest in teachers and teacher development. I would seek out good teachers and ask them what they are doing. As good teaching is often better seen than described, I would show upcoming teachers what good teachers and lively classrooms look like. All of you in this room have had at least a few good teachers whom you remember. Each was different; each reached you in a different way at a different time in your lives. Consider the diversity of strategies they used in helping you learn, in helping you discover the potential you had within you to learn because you actually wanted to learn, because you needed to know. I had a Latin teacher, Mr. Clegg, who showed us by example what a gentleman was. He was such a good and gentle soul that it would literally have caused us pain to misbehave in his class. I had a history teacher, Dr. Sears, who used no textbooks and gave us massive written report assignments every two weeks with a list of alternative suggested questions we might try to address in our papers, and with a full bibliography of real history books and biographies we might consult. This encouraged my love of early American history, my thirst for reading, and my desire to build a library.

As for a national curriculum, I would encourage dozens more efforts like it, so that our teachers would have many examples of possible means to healthy learning, but I would NEVER suggest we make any effort to REQUIRE a single curriculum. It would stamp out the spark in our teachers that is needed for each of them to meet the peculiar challenges they face on any given day in any given classroom. The freedom to exercise good judgment is as important to developing good teachers as we claim it is to educating our future leaders.

Thank you.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

APPENDIX

Core Knowledge Foundation - Curriculum, Publications, and Support for Knowledge-based Education

"The Core Knowledge Foundation publishes and distributes a wide variety of education books and materials, including the Core Knowledge Sequence, a detailed outline of recommended curricular content to be taught in language arts, history and geography, mathematics, science, music, and the visual arts from preschool to grade eight. We support a growing nationwide network of Core Knowledge schools through instructional materials and professional development workshops.

The Foundation is also currently developing the Core Knowledge Language Arts Program, an ambitious effort to systematically teach and support the language skills and content knowledge children need to build reading comprehension. The program is currently being field tested in 17 cities, including a major pilot program in 10 New York City public schools."

International Baccalaureate Program - a non-profit educational foundation

"Founded in 1968, we currently work with 3,305 schools in 141 countries to develop and offer three challenging programmes to over 969,000 students aged 3 to 19 years. Our three programmes help develop the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills to live, learn and work in a rapidly globalizing world."

Teach for America -

- 1) "We recruit committed recent college graduates of all backgrounds to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools"
- 2) "We train and develop these corps members so that they have an immediate positive impact on their students"
- 3) "We foster the leadership of our alumni as they address this problem from all sectors"

"In the 2011-12 school year, more than 9,300 corps members will teach 600,000 students while nearly 24,000 alumni will continue to deepen their impact as educational leaders and advocates.

KIPP - "a national network of free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools with a track record of preparing students in underserved communities for success in college and in life. There are currently 109 KIPP schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia serving more than 32,000 students."

Further Reflections

"Race to the Top not only connects student test scores to teacher performance, it connects teacher performance to college performance. RTTT requires the "winning" states to connect the performance of teachers with the colleges and universities that prepared those teachers for the classrooms. Eventually, every college and university with a teacher preparation program will receive a score from the State on how well it prepared teachers. A teacher preparation program could lose its State certification based on these scores. In effect, student scores on standardized tests will be used to measure the effectiveness of teachers and the effectiveness of teachers will be used to measure the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs!" Per Tina Bjarekull, President of the MD Independent College and University Association.

I think this is a very sad development that will encourage the limitation of teacher responsibility for a better, broader education of the young in areas that will not be tested. Bad! Bad!

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“Good educators recognize that teaching is more art than science; more of a calling than a profession. And that true "collaboration" is achieved not among students working together or with computers, but among students and teachers (and parents) working together, with teachers serving as mentors and role models, guided by a vision of education as a stimulus to individual and social betterment.

“So what does student-centered learning really mean? It's about avoiding the idea of students as "customers," with the concomitant notion that the customer is always right. It's about avoiding the notion that a magic bullet exists (such as digital classrooms) to educational success. It's really about putting the most talented leaders in front of our students, and empowering them to stimulate the intellectual and especially the moral growth of students.

“If you wanted your son or daughter truly to learn, would you put your trust in faster computers in networked classrooms, more "student-centered" classroom activities with his or her peers, or a Socrates to prod him or her to ask fundamental questions about a life worth living?

“Sadly, we seem today to prefer computers and customer-centered learning as measured by test score results. And what of our modern-day Socrates? After parental complaints about "unsettling" questioning of students and subpar standardized test scores, our elected leaders once again made him drink hemlock.” (Lost the citation to an article on email that crossed my desk between 9/1 and 9/6/11)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The Problem of “Accountability”: It narrows perspective almost unconsciously. It moves us to quantify, and we find ourselves counting the things we can count. This is a valuable tool for many purposes, but it needs to be used sparingly if we are seeking quality as well as quantity. It is easy to count, far harder to form a qualitative judgment.

I would return to the language of “responsibility”. I heard today the story of a teacher who, when presented with the particular learning difficulties of a student, said to the parent “That is not my problem. I am held accountable for your child’s test scores, period.” The teacher was not showing any responsibility for the care of her student and her student’s learning problems.

It is easy to understand what accountability to a government agency might mean, but very hard to understand our responsibility to or for that agency. On the other hand, it is easy to understand what a teacher’s responsibility for her student might look like, and hard to understand how she might be accountable for the child. This is because the language of counting belongs more to professions like auditing, bookkeeping, and work involving weights, measures and prices than it does to professions like teaching and medicine and law, where one is dealing with cooperative arts that require the engagement and support of human students, patients and clients for their teachers, doctors, and lawyers to succeed. Responsibility sounds more personal, accountability more impersonal – a bad image for one of the most personal of vocations.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Born, not taught: I heard a teacher say today that teachers are born, not taught, suggesting that teacher education or teacher development might be a wasted effort. I think I recognize some truth in this. Some teachers seem to be able to go about their work effortlessly, while others struggle mightily to considerably less effect. But to grant this observation its full weight would be to acknowledge that our teachers are incapable of learning, an awful assumption to begin with. It admits of the possibility that some people can never learn, possibly that no one can teach. Surely it is true that some people are ill suited to teach, just as others would make poor plumbers. Such teachers may need to leave the profession. On the other hand, why not help them find this out for themselves in a classroom setting where they are the students, not the authorities, where they may rediscover the joys of learning themselves in a teacher development program – in the hope that they may be reenergized for their own classroom, better able to show their students what a love of learning looks like because they have just experienced it?

My experience is that greatest obstacle to good teaching is the teacher's need to control the conversation and direction of the class. I am not talking about the need to establish rules of good behavior necessary for the classroom to function. But flexibility sufficient to hear from students what they understand and what they do not is critical to good teaching. So also the flexibility to entertain an opinion or question that does not belong to the teacher! Some of our teachers may need to learn the importance of listening attentively.

By the way, this question of what teaching really is and whether it is possible to teach anything lies at the heart of one of the greatest of Platonic dialogues, "Meno". These questions are deep ones and difficult to get at. You will hear faculty at St. John's College say to one another that there is no such thing as teaching; there is only learning. They are not being silly and they mean something by this. But that is another story!

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Unions: I was asked today how we can expect learning to flourish in the face of union contract restrictions. "The unions are the problem", I heard. Another said, "How can anyone even understand 300-400 page contracts. I understand the problem of contract restrictions. I am a former management labor lawyer. While unions have responsibility for their members' interests, let us remember that management has its responsibilities too. It takes two parties to sign those contracts; if a provision is counter-productive, just say "No" to it. It is not as though our very own teachers are incapable of an education in the reasons for a position management may take. My experience is the opposite.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Charter Schools: I am not against them. I am for flexibility in education and I appreciate the power of local control, parental choice and parental involvement in their children's schools. If some of these things are not possible in a local public school, a charter school may be a decent alternative. But let us not imagine that charter schools are the answer to the nation's educational ills or that these schools are more successful in raising the national tests scores of their students. Some of them are really quite fine, just as many non-charter public schools are; some of them are quite poor, just as some non-charter schools are.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

International tests: “Nations that score in top tiers of international exams (i.e. TIMMS) have common national curricula. However, they only test those worthy of excelling through secondary schools. We are often compared to those nations. Even our immigrant children who can not read English are forced to take our national and state tests. I have proctored those exams. I was forced to bubble in their names as they could not read the directions. Then, they left the test blank. Names, not responses, must be bubbled in for 100% accountability.

Educational policy makers like to force national curriculum because it works in Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Finland... where they do not have a diverse population and where they do not test all students. We are forced to test 100% of students even the severely disabled, blind, mentally impaired, paralyzed, homeless, illegal immigrant, and English language learners.” (From a son who teaches in a Chicago-area public high school.)

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Influence of major philanthropic foundations: “The distinction between federal & non federal policy with the Race to the Top incentive program is very relevant. But, it is important to add that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli Broad Foundation were the two largest financiers of federal education programs. These two private foundations have created grant programs tied to federal dollars if schools adopt their agenda of reform. Now, the federal public policy and federal grant programs issue grants to public schools based on the agendas of the Gates & Broad foundations. The Race to the Top program is public policy for the Gates & Broad Foundations. States and districts that follow the Gates and Broad grant guidelines also won the Race to the Top monies. Federal Education Policy is now dictated by two private foundations. This is ... a reason why federal Pell Grants are evaporating. They preach "less BIG government and less regulatory oversight." The irony of course is that they have created more regulatory oversight, more testing, more accountability, with less public funding... hence enter the private foundations to save the failures of the public sector. And, the truth is that the federal education dept can not survive today's economic and political climate without private foundation money. Public education takes private money to advance narrow private foundation agendas and they call it public policy. Big problem!” (From a son who teaches in a Chicago-area public high school.)

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Gunnar’s Story:

Let me relate a simple story: I have a son who very early in life swore off attending a liberal arts college. He was 16 when he told me “I’m not going to go to that school where my brother is (St. John’s College), and I don’t want a liberal education, whatever that means.” He happened to have an interest in automobiles, his uncle happened to be an automobile mechanic, and we happened to have an old junker in the driveway, a 1960s something Volkswagen bug. Almost nothing worked in the car; it wouldn’t go, and my wife and her brother were working to get the car to perform its principle purpose – going. My brother-in-law saw an opportunity to engage my disinterested son when he discovered that the windshield wipers weren’t working and asked my son to give him a hand.

“What would you do to fix this?” he asked.

“I’d get the manual out and see what it says”, my son responded.

“But there is no manual. What then?”

“Then I’d ask the guy at the repair shop.”

“But he’s not here, and we can’t get the car there. Do you think we see can figure it out for ourselves?”

“But I don’t know anything”, my son responded.

“Ah, that’s the thing. Let’s see if that’s true.”

Uncle Ken then opened the hood and asked my son to see if he could find the fluid lines to the wipers. Could he figure out where the wiper fluid tank was, and could he tell whether there was any fluid in the tank? My son found the tank and it was full. He tested the line as best he could to determine that it wasn’t clogged.

“Can you see where the fluid line goes beneath the hood? Track that to its origin.”

Long story short: after an hour of looking, testing, failing, trying again, failing again, and thinking out loud (“I wonder if this might work”), my son got fired up and excited. In the end, he discovered that the fluid line was hooked up to the pressure valve of the spare tire in the back of the car, and lo and behold, the spare tire was flat. “You mean the spare tire supplied the pressure to power the wiper?” my son asked.

“Well, let’s see.” With that, my son pumped up the spare tire, thereby priming the pump. He moved the controls on the dashboard, and the wipers worked. I’ll never forget the glow on my son’s face when he announced “I got it! I figured it out!” (Not “The wipers are working”, mind you.)

“You have now had an experience in liberal education”, I suggested to ears that were still deaf to the idea – ears that would be open to the idea a few years later.

I doubt that Volkswagens are built these days to provide such simple opportunities for basic learning by seeing and doing, but every challenge in life provides us with learning opportunities that can be just as liberating, without recourse to manuals, without seasoned experts, if we open ourselves to the possibility.

Why do I call this experience liberating? Because the learner (my son) had to make do without the manual or the expert. Liberated from the direction and expertise of others, he was reduced to rely on himself with only a little encouragement from his tutor uncle. He was led to see what the answer was by a series of questions alone. The turning point was his willingness to continue the search for an answer only after acknowledging “But I don’t know anything.” Understanding his ignorance was necessary for learning to begin because he had to be open to the possibility that he had something to learn, and that he was willing, even eager, to find the answer. He was open to an experience of truly “wondering” how he might find an answer. This wonder did not come from knowledge but from a desire to know, born not in understanding but in ignorance. This became a kind of “knowing ignorance”, an intelligent perplexity that came from discarding false notions.

Another thing happened. He grew from a posture of boredom over a problem that was put to him, to perplexity over the difficulty of solving it with meager tools, to excited engagement in the exercise because he wanted to discover the answer. He wanted to know the answer for its own

sake, not just to fix the wipers. He was liberated from reliance on the opinions and expertise of others, liberated from the debilitating fear of the unknown, and finally liberated from his own ignorance, though only after acknowledging that ignorance. (Our ignorance of the world about us may be the one certainty in life, and recognition of that is the pathway to learning.)

Yet one more lesson! My son had discovered the interconnectedness of apparently unrelated apparatuses, and they helped him understand how the car was assembled, even how it was conceived to operate in the first place.

This case is, I will maintain, the barest expression of what we ought to wish to see in our students in our schools.

It seems to me that it is possible to be a liberally educated auto mechanic and that the liberally educated mechanic is likely to be superior in the long run to the reader of the expert's manual. He will certainly be the more interesting conversationalist because he has had the deeply human experience of being fired by the desire to find the answer for himself, something that can be understood across all human activities and vocations. He is also likely to be a better teacher of other mechanics because he will understand better two valuable preconditions for good teaching: that the learner will learn better if he has the desire to learn and to make the lesson his very own, and that the teacher himself will have acquired a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of the car's assembly and the builder's conception of workings of the car. In the end, he is also likely to learn more quickly each time he faces another seemingly unrelated problem with the car because he will have begun to understand the interconnectedness of everything about the car.

From this lesson in the art of being a good mechanic, can we draw an analogy to an education in the art of being a good human being?