

Education is critical to our growing needs

Thomas Jefferson's belief, that democracy could not survive without an educated electorate, was seminal in the establishment of a system to educate America's children. The idea is this: If all children—not just the well-to-do—become competent in literacy, math, and reasoning, they'll have the basic skills to advance further, They'll be better able to become capable workers and professionals, wise consumers, and knowledgeable voters. Any who don't will become prisoners of their own ignorance, and relinquish their freedom.

During the 20th century, the minimum education to support a family on a single income advanced, from eight years in the 1900s, to twelve 12 years by the 1950s. By 2000, it was evident that post-secondary education would be needed for most jobs paying enough to support a family. Today, public education's ability to provide an adequate yet affordable skill set lags behind the growing needs of business and society. There are plenty of people looking for work, and a growing number of jobs available, yet not enough of the former are qualified for the latter. This owes largely to problems in our educational system:

1. Teaching to the test: Standardized testing is a good idea, but only if it tests students' level of knowledge and skills to function in the real world. Communication and comprehension, critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving are such skills. Memorizing answers to multiple-choice exams is not.
2. Inadequate background in sciences and history: The "three R's" are an essential start, but not nearly enough for functional competence. In today's world, everyone needs to understand the basics of natural science. For our own health and safety, as well as for evaluating information and doing business, we need to know how matter and energy interact; to understand the environmental cycles that sustain life; to learn—before it's too late—that

babies aren't brought by the stork, that earth's resources aren't infinite, and that science isn't "just a belief system." In social sciences, some psychology and sociology are helpful, and a grasp of economics is essential. And those who hope to master commerce, diplomacy, or politics must be acquainted with our geographical and historical trajectory with respect to culture and time.

3. Teaching logic only as an adjunct to science and math: Abstract reasoning is a natural human ability, but children are only taught to apply it to a few specific subjects. Unless they go on to college, few learn the fundamentals of how to reason well (and to avoid errors) as a general-purpose skill. This "fourth R" should be a required part of the high school curriculum.
4. Disappearing lifetime careers and obsolescence of early education: To keep pace with accelerating needs of business and technology, we can't stop learning. We need to program periodic educational updates into our lives.
5. Treating education as a minor local concern: Managing and funding education locally is an American tradition—but one that breeds inequality. For Americans to acquire the skills and expertise to compete globally for markets and jobs, education must be a national priority. We must scrap the notion of supporting it hit-and-miss with local property tax levies, and draw on general revenue at the state level or higher for reliable and uniform funding.

Keep it real. Freedom isn't free. But isn't it worth the investment in quality education to preserve it?