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Achieving Commonality and Fairness

FROM, E. D. HIRSCH, THE KNOWLEDGE DEFICIT (NY: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 2006).

Reading and a Wider Crisis

Until we solve the reading problem, we can neither compete optimally in the knowledge economy nor fulfill the aim of giving every child a fair start in life. In solving the reading problem, more is at stake even than economic prosperity and fairness. The very fabric of our peaceable and unified democracy is at risk when we do not know how to communicate with each other. Reading comprehension depends on the more primordial understanding of speech that occurs within the common public sphere, on the shared knowledge that enables verbal comprehension in general. A content-neutral, skills-oriented concept of education has the unintended effect of depressing reading scores and diminishing the shared content we need for communication and solidarity within the nation as a whole. The red-state/blue-state phenomenon is just one sign of this decline of commonality. Lack of communication between generations and a general lack of trust between groups are others. People who cannot communicate well with one another do not trust one another. They do not feel a sense of responsibility to the larger community. A lot is being written about the culture wars in the United States. Such conflict is inevitable in a big, diverse country. But some of the polarization has less to do with ideology than with the inherent suspicion and lack of

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solidarity among people who fail to share a common basis of knowledge — a commonality of discourse that alone enables shared allusion and mutual comprehension.

The practical focus of this book on improving reading comprehension is therefore a way into larger, more portentous issues. Reading scores would be greatly improved if we offered students a cumulative content-oriented reading program during the class periods devoted to language arts. But that remedy, if left by itself, would be a less than optimal solution. As we have seen, high reading skill is the result of a good general early education, not of a narrow emphasis on reading as such. A focus on the ninety minutes currently being devoted to language arts each day is a practical beginning. But a knowledge orientation to language arts by itself will not change the skills orientation of our schools. We need to supplement that with a knowledge approach to *all* school subjects.

Fulfilling Our Nation's Highest Ideals

The American principle of opportunity and fairness implies not just effective early education but also a degree of commonality in education. The founders of our educational principles, Thomas Jefferson in Virginia and, later, Horace Mann in Massachusetts, saw this implication clearly as the very essence of the democratic ideal. The child of the prince and the child of the pauper deserve the same initial chance. These founders did not propose giving all children merely the same *kind* of initial chance, but rather an *identical* early education. They reasoned that in a democracy, we can't predict who will end up as a pauper and who as a president. Jefferson therefore proposed giving children an identical early education at state expense. Massachusetts actually instituted what Jefferson had proposed — the "common school."

In offering a common curriculum, Horace Mann recognized another value besides equality of opportunity. He believed that such a

based achievement gap.

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curriculum not only gives everyone an equal chance, it also enables everyone to participate in the public sphere. According to Mann, an important reason for offering the same early education to all children was not only to bring them into the democracy and economy of the nation but to encourage national solidarity and community. Commonality of knowledge, he thought, would expand people's sympathies beyond their narrow group interests to embrace the interests of the nation as a whole. Here is how he stated that perceptive insight, in the famous twelfth report of the Massachusetts school board in 1848:

> A fellow-feeling for one's class or caste is the common instinct of hearts not wholly sunk in selfish regards for person, or for family. The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society.

Mann understood that fairness and social solidarity alike are linked to the common school. The two aims go together. You cannot have good early education that is fair to all without a common body of content, and without a common body of content, you cannot have national solidarity. Yet common content is the one thing that is made impossible by the reigning ideas and practices of our schools. It is no wonder that we are failing both in education and in solidarity.

Constantly Changing Schools — A Critical Issue

Mobility is a misleading term to denote students' moving from one school to another in the middle of the year. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students who migrate during the school year is appallingly high, and the effects are dishearteningly severe. One study has analyzed those effects on 9,915 children. With this large group, the researchers were able to factor out the influences of pov-

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erty, race, single-parent status, and lack of parental education in order to isolate just the effects of changing schools. Even with other adverse influences factored out, children who changed schools often were much more likely than those who did not to exhibit behavioral problems and to fail a grade.[1] The researchers found that the adverse effects of such social and academic incoherence are greatly intensified when parents have low educational levels and when compensatory education is not available in the home. But this big fact of student mobility is generally ignored in discussions of school reform. It is as if that elephant in the middle of the parlor is less relevant or important than other concerns, such as the supposed dangers of encouraging uniformity or of allowing an "outsider" to decide what subjects are to be taught at which grade level.

The finding that our mobile students (who are preponderantly from low-income families) perform worse than stable ones does not mean that their lower performance is a consequence of poverty. That is to commit the fallacy of social determinism. Where there is greater commonality of the curriculum, the effects of mobility are less severe. In a summary of research on student mobility, Herbert Walberg states that "common learning goals, curriculum, and assessment within states (or within an entire nation) . . . alleviate the grave learning disabilities faced by children, especially poorly achieving children, who move from one district to another with different curricula, assessment, and goals."[2] The adverse effects of student mobility are much less severe in countries that use a nationwide core curriculum than in the United States, where no national guidelines alleviate the trauma and incoherence of the fragmented educational experience of the millions of students who change schools in the middle of the year.

The United States has the highest school mobility rate of all developed countries. The statistics are eloquent, and need to be stated and restated rather than ignored. According to the most recent census, every year 45 percent of Americans change their residence.[3] Among these domestic migrants are over 20 million schoolchildren

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between the ages of five and fourteen. Those in the lowest income brackets move most frequently. Few caregivers are able to time their moves to coincide with the beginning and end of the school year. Not all of these changes of residence by children entail changes of their school, but a large percentage of them do.[4] In a typical American school district, the average rate at which students transfer in and out of schools during the academic year is about one third.[5] In a typical inner-city school, only about half the students who start in September are still there in May — a mobility rate of 50 percent.[6] The General Accounting Office reports that one sixth of all third-graders attend at least three schools between first and third grade. A quarter of low-income third-graders have attended at least three different schools. Among students with limited English proficiency, 34 percent of third-graders have attended three schools.[7] A much larger percentage of these migrating third-graders read below grade level, as compared to those who have not yet changed schools.[8] The average mobility rates for the inner city lie routinely between 45 percent and 80 percent, with many suburban rates between 25 percent and 40 percent. Some schools in New York and other cities have mobility rates of over 100 percent — that is, the total number of students moving in and out during the year exceeds the total number of students attending the school.[9]

Given the curricular incoherence in a typical American school even for those who stay at the same school, the education provided to frequently moving students is tragically fragmented. The high mobility of low-income parents guarantees that disadvantaged children will be most severely affected by the educational handicaps of changing schools, and that they will be the ones who are most adversely affected by lack of commonality across schools. In an earlier book I deplored the "myth of the local curriculum" — a myth because lack of commonality across classrooms in the same school and across schools in the same district means that no definable curriculum exists.[10] I should have added to this the "myth of the local school." The

term *local school* implies a thereness, a stability. But if our idea of school includes, as it should, not just the building and the staff but also the students who attend it during the year, then the notion of a local school begins to fade into something that shifts like sand dunes. If we include students in our concept, then there are relatively few local schools in any stable sense in the urban United States, and almost none that are attended chiefly by disadvantaged students.

Localism and a Perfect Storm of Bad Educational Ideas

Along with the terrible trinity of naturalism, formalism, and determinism, localism deserves a dishonored place in American education. Among the wider public it may be the most powerful educational idea of all. Localism has less to do with educational arguments than with American traditions. On the surface, it simply implies that our state or our town will decide what shall be taught in our schools. It says nothing about what those things should be, so localism is another content-free idea, and as a practical matter it powerfully reinforces an approach that is short on content. It brings liberals and conservatives together to collaborate in support of anticontent, process-oriented ideas about education.

Liberals and conservatives alike are suspicious of imposed content. Conservatives want local citizens rather than the state to decide what should be taught. They fear that a government curriculum would force-feed children "abominations" like *Heather Has Two Mommies.* Liberals fear that a government curriculum would force-feed children things like Christian theology and anti-Darwinism. Both groups worry that if decisions on curriculum are taken away from towns and states, the other side will impose its repugnant ideological views on schooling. Localism encourages the process curriculum as the safe ground on which liberals and conservatives can meet. After all, if there is no definitely imposed content, there is nothing to object to.

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This suspicion-fed collaboration between liberals and conservatives helps explain why the process point of view has persisted despite its inability to raise achievement or attain fairness. Educationist, process ideas thrive on the liberal-conservative standoff, and our schools and school boards operate under a gentlemen's agreement that unites these groups behind the process-oriented creed. An undefined local curriculum that is free of specifically ordained content cannot be inherently liberal or conservative. However, a process-oriented curriculum cannot be educationally effective, either. That is the devil's pact that is being made in American education.

The federal government does not set curricula in the United States. Under the tradition of localism, individual districts have, until the very recent "standards movement," set out their own guidelines, which have been remarkably vague.[11] Now the states are beginning to influence the content of the school curriculum, although as many observers have pointed out, current state standards are usually just as unspecific as the vague, process-oriented district curricula. Typically, state standards in language arts do not mention a single required text and thereby avoid giving offence to any group. But is there evidence that if a state did decide to provide a detailed, grade-by-grade specification of core content, it would use that content as an instrument of indoctrination, as both liberals and conservatives fear?

The public schools in a democracy should not take sides in still-disputed areas. Gay marriage comes to mind. Children are required to attend school. They must not be compelled to attend a school that inculcates ideas that their parents and caregivers find repugnant. The United States, because of its history of religious refuge, has a first-rate tradition of cultural sensitivity — for example, in the way it has treated Amish beliefs and sensibilities. Unlike the French, with their powerfully secular traditions, we do not and would not forbid Muslim girls to wear headscarves. It is true that the absolute claims of religion constantly press against American secular political traditions. But a basic theme of American history is that the common public sphere is tolerant and allows each sect to interact with others

0406

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under the umbrella of secular law, so long as it does not impose on others. Deeply inbred in our history and law is the principle that this tolerant civil polity will trump each intolerant sect that tries to control other sects or antisects. When the Board of Education of Kansas, populated by religious conservatives, seemed to overstep that principle of keeping controversial issues out of the schools, public opinion compelled it to retreat.

A subtler point is that the very act of defining very *openly* what should be taught in school would be a better protection against illegitimate mind control than the current vague, process-oriented guidelines. A highly public and open specification of what core subject matter will be taught, grade-by grade, is a much safer protection against indoctrination in the public schools than the current arrangement, under which nobody really knows what is being taught.

Currently, the main sources of indoctrination are teachers, not textbooks. Textbook publishers, wishing to sell in every state, are careful to exclude what might be offensive under the cover of a how-to approach to education.[12] But this orientation, in which content is not specified, actually invites indoctrination at the hands of the teacher. Under the covering idea that what counts is how-to knowledge, and in the absence of specific content guidelines, the teacher is left free to teach critical thinking and deep understanding with whatever content seems appropriate. I well remember picking up a German grammar book in Communist East Berlin long before the Berlin wall was erected. Precisely because the book was oriented to the formal elements of German grammar, the content was left to the indoctrinators. If the grammar was to teach declarative sentences, examples were sentences like "The American capitalist imperialist is unfair to the worker." The formal character of an imperative sentence was shown in "Yankee, go home!" A process orientation offers no inherent protection against indoctrination. Irresponsibility is much less likely to occur when the schools are clear about the basic specific academic content that children should be taught at a particular grade level.

explains in detail how American schools can serve as the strongest possible antidote to poverty and to our frustrating race-based achievement gap.

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Are There Decisive Advantages in Specifying Definite Content?

The aim of imparting high reading ability to children has turned out to entail imparting broad knowledge to them. This in turn requires us to oversee some of the content that will be taught at each grade level, in order to avoid the huge gaps and boring repetitions that currently characterize the schooling many children receive. An excellent account of the surprising fact that a public school curriculum typically does not actually exist in the United States is Roger Shattuck's recent piece in the *New York Review of Books* titled "The Shame of the Schools."[13] Shattuck shows how the thick documents that purport to be "state standards" and "district curricula" are so generalized that they provide no real guidance to teachers. In one or two states, notably Massachusetts, the official guidelines have recently been made more specific (with consequent gains in achievement), but typically in the United States, state and district guidelines offer schools no definite information about grade-by-grade content. What sort of "local control" is that?

Let's look at one state's guidelines for language arts. (I won't reveal the state, since its request for me to review the document indicates its own dissatisfaction with them.) This state curriculum guide is quite typical. It is a 103-page document organized into a dozen broad categories, all of which apply to all the grades from kindergarten through grade twelve. The general categories have process rubrics like "Students shall demonstrate knowledge and understanding of media as a mode of communication," "Students shall employ a wide range of strategies as they write, using the writing process appropriately," and "Students shall apply a wide range of strategies to read and comprehend written materials." Then, in the more "detailed" amplifications of these categories for the early grades, we find directives like these: "Distinguish the purpose of various types of media presentations, using informational or entertainment presentations," "Use a variety of planning strategies/organizers," and "Draft information

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collected during reading and/or research into writing." For later grades the detailed amplifications are directives like "Write research reports that include a thesis and use a variety of sources" and "Read a variety of literature, including historical fiction, autobiography, and realistic fiction." The whole document is composed of similarly empty admonitions.

If calling these guidelines empty seems a harsh indictment, consider the following test to decide whether your own local standards actually determine a curriculum. Can you take another country's guidelines that really do define grade-by-grade content (say, the excellent Japanese or Finnish elementary guidelines) and, excluding the subject of local history, teach that curriculum and at the same time follow your local guidelines? Usually the answer is yes. As indicated, American guidelines are so vague that you can teach most of the Japanese or the Finnish curriculum and also follow the vague American guidelines without adding extra content. Let's consider the directive "Read a variety of literature, including historical fiction, autobiography, and realistic fiction." In the state guidelines I've been asked to evaluate, this rubric serves for grades five, six, and seven! Since not a single title is mentioned in the whole hundred-page document, it's not hard to see how this could be. Following this rubric for grades five, six, and seven, we could teach the Japanese language arts curriculum or the Finnish curriculum or the French curriculum or the Chinese curriculum (in translation, of course). American schools that wish to follow their own state standards as well as teach the detailed specifications of the Japanese curriculum (or, more appropriately, the grade-by-grade Core Knowledge Sequence) can readily do so without double duty.[14]

This illustrates the main shortcoming of these process-oriented, formalistic guidelines — they offer no real guidance. A second shortcoming is that such guidelines guarantee an incoherent education with huge gaps and boring repetitions. Elementary school students reasonably complain of reading *Charlotte's Web* three years in a row.

- tackles the weaknesses of specific state-by-state curricula;
- explains in detail how American schools can serve as the strongest possible antidote to poverty and to our frustrating race-based achievement gap.

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That's not too surprising. With guidelines like these, why should Mr. Green in grade three, Ms. Jones in grade four, and Ms. Hughes in grade five not treat their students to a book they are very fond of? Of course, while students are reading that estimable work three years running (being bored in two of them), they are missing at least two other estimable books they might have been introduced to.

This kind of problem is not limited to language arts. I once did an analysis of a district science curriculum which, like most American curricula, had a hands-on, formalistic, process orientation and found that students did a hands-on study of seeds in four different grades but were never required to learn about photosynthesis at all.[15] Gaps and repetitions are the reality of American students' school experience even when they stay in the same school, and the gaps are still greater for those many disadvantaged students who must change schools. These gaps and repetitions occur unwittingly, not through the fecklessness of guideline makers nor the incompetence of teachers but under the influence of very inadequate process theories. The resulting incoherence in the content to which the students are exposed is by itself enough to explain why, compared to students elsewhere, who experience a more coherent curriculum, American students fall further and further behind the longer they stay in school.

For students, the vagueness of the local guidelines produces an educational experience that is sparse, repetitious, incoherent, and fragmented. For teachers, the incoherence produces an intensely unsatisfactory professional experience, which induces a large percentage of them to leave the profession each year. One quarter of all beginning teachers quit their jobs within four years.[16] In urban settings, 50 percent of beginning teachers leave in five years or less.[17] They leave mainly because of low job satisfaction and stressful work conditions, not because they can make better salaries elsewhere.[18] Interestingly, one big cause of teacher dissatisfaction as well as student boredom seems to be the more chaotic character of the classroom at each successive grade level. American high school teachers are more dissatis-

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fied with their jobs than elementary teachers, and fifth-grade teachers are more dissatisfied than first-grade teachers.[19]

One explanation for this gradual increase in teacher job dissatisfaction — the reason the teacher's task becomes more difficult and unpleasant with each grade level — may be that as American students advance through the grades, their preparation levels become ever more diverse. This was a finding that Stevenson and Stigler emphasized in *The Learning Gap*, a superb comparative study of American and Asian schools.[20] American teachers now take it as a matter of course that in the same classroom they must teach students who have gained and who have not gained the most basic knowledge they need to understand what is to be taught. Here we are speaking not about differences of ability but about huge differences in relevant preparation.

If the teacher directs the preponderance of instruction to students who haven't gained the prerequisite knowledge, the repetition of that basic knowledge to students who already know it is extremely boring. But if the teacher directs the class to those students who have gained the prerequisites, then the lagging students will fall still further behind. For both groups, the classroom will be boring. Boredom creates discipline problems, which further contribute to teachers' low job satisfaction. These are all effects that can be traced to the incoherence of the content that students experience under vague guidelines.

Stevenson and Stigler found that teachers have much greater job satisfaction when they can depend on one another in a supportive chain over the grade levels. Then all the students in a class can be counted on to have a reasonable level of preparation for the new grade level. This makes for a much happier situation for both the student and the teacher. In short, the doctrine that teachers have been instructed to hold — that their almost complete control over what they will teach is a plus for them — turns out, in considering the larger picture of curricular incoherence, to be a major cause of their professional unhappiness. By the same token, curricular incoherence

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is also the major cause of the inherent unfairness of our schooling. The unproductive use of school time, the changing content, the repetition, and the fragmentation that result from lack of specificity are bad for all students but are most disadvantageous to the already disadvantaged. The unparalleled vagueness of our curricular guides makes our system the most chaotic and unfair in the world.

Thinking the Unthinkable: A Core of Common Content in the Early Grades

By "commonality of content," I do not mean a 100 percent common curriculum across the nation under which each child in each early grade follows exactly the same course of study. I mean rather a more reasonable percentage of common content, such as Jefferson and Mann had in view — say, between 40 and 60 percent of the topics that young children are taught. But before I try to detach even that modest proposal from the realm of the unthinkable, I shall deal with a prior issue, a purely structural one — the grade level at which a widely-agreed-upon topic is introduced to children.

In the face of extensive student mobility, we need to reach agreement not only about what subject matter should be taught in school but also about the grade level at which that agreed-upon subject matter should be taught. Just as we have created a convention about the standard spelling of *Mississippi*, we need to create a convention about the grade level at which school topics shall be introduced. If we agree that primary-grade children should be taught about the *Mayflower*, then we have an obligation to decide when the *Mayflower* will be introduced. The ravages of mobility on disadvantaged students ought to exert a powerful moral claim in favor of such a policy, which deserves to trump local sentiments about whether kindergarten is or is not the right place for the *Mayflower*. No one can really answer that question in absolute terms. In most cases, questions about proper grade level have no absolute right answer, because, as Jerome Bruner

famously observed, almost any topic, if taught appropriately, can be taught at any school age.[21]

But Bruner's insight emphatically does not argue for laissez-faire regarding the sequencing of topics. On the contrary, using an automotive analogy, either side of the road, appropriately demarcated, is suitable for driving in either direction — which is precisely why it is necessary to create a convention for determining whether the right side or the left side will be used. Whatever side of the road a state decides on, that same convention needs to hold for all roads in all the states, because cars cross state lines every day — just as disadvantaged students move every day across schools. The consequence of *not* creating a convention about the sequencing of agreed-upon topics is that some disadvantaged students will never hear about the *Mayflower* while others will hear about the *Mayflower* ad nauseam, in kindergarten, grade one, grade two, and beyond.

Mired in tradition, in anticontent ideas, and above all in complacency, we are one of the few nations to ignore the need for rationalizing a content sequence in the early grades. In the 1930s, struggling against his anticontent colleagues at Teachers College, the great William Bagley observed that we, of all nations, most need such commonality:

> The notion that each community must have a curriculum all its own is not only silly, but tragic. It neglects two important needs. The first, as we have already seen, is the need of a democracy for many common elements in the culture of all the people, to the end that the people may discuss collective problems in terms that will convey common meanings. The second need is extremely practical. It is the need of recognizing the fact that American people simply will not "stay put." They are the most mobile people in the world . . . Under these conditions, failure to have a goodly measure of uniformity in school subjects and grade placement is a gross injustice to at least ten million school children at the present time.[22]

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As we have seen from the recent census reports, the injustice that Bagley identified in the 1930s now extends to many more than 10 million children. If we can reach consensus about a core of topics that should be taught, we are under a powerful moral and patriotic obligation to standardize the sequence and the grade level in which those topics are to be taught.

That's the first point. Let's call it the "When shall we teach the *Mayflower*?" question. But of course it is preceded by the "Shall we teach the *Mayflower* at all?" question, which is intellectually and politically the more difficult problem for liberal democracies. But it is a problem that we need to discuss openly. As I have shown in analyzing the "myth of the local curriculum," state and district guidelines typically do not mandate specific topics to be taught. I have also shown that this lack of specificity is equivalent in most areas of American schooling to having no mandated curriculum at all, much less a locally mandated one. It is true that some of the new state standards can point to increasingly specific guidance in a few areas, but these are the exception. In general, the de facto curriculum in the American school is whatever content is found in whatever textbooks are used and in selections made according to the tastes and beliefs of individual teachers. In other words, the curriculum in most American classrooms is an unknown curriculum. More openness about content specifics will reduce the liberal/conservative suspicions that are reasonably aroused by a hidden curriculum. One of the great advantages of discussing the hitherto untouchable topic of a nationwide sequence of core content is that an open, broad-daylight discussion of content is a protection against the hidden, secret, incoherent curriculum that has led to educational malfeasance, social unfairness, and cultural polarization.

For many years, my colleagues and I have wrestled with the "Shall we teach the *Mayflower* at all?" question. In 1987 I devoted a book to that issue. The combination of my scholarly specialties led me to realize that reading, writing, and all communication depend

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on hidden, taken-for-granted background knowledge that is not directly expressed in what is said or written. Therefore, in order to teach children how to understand what is said or written, we must teach them that taken-for-granted background knowledge. I hoped that this was a technical point on which all parties could agree, for we all want children to be able to read and communicate. It follows that we are obliged to give them the background knowledge they need to do so.

I was disappointed to discover that this simple (and scientifically correct) idea was opposed in the 1980s and 1990s not only by the powerful anticontent traditions of the education schools but also by many university intellectuals, who were not so sure we should teach the *Mayflower* and a lot of other traditional matter. Their aim was to improve and diversify American culture, not perpetuate it. This combination of forces — the anticontent ideas of the teaching profession and the let's-change-American-culture ideas of many intellectuals — has for several decades been delaying a descriptive approach to deciding what needs to be taught if children are to be able to read with comprehension. The ed school anticontent proponents are simply wrong. The culture-changing idealists, while often quite admirable, have oversimplified how the job of changing the culture can best be done, and have placed the burden of their ideals on the backs of disadvantaged children, who, because they are not gaining the traditional knowledge they need in order to read and write, are not learning to do so.

The tacit, taken-for-granted knowledge needed for general reading and writing in a speech community is by definition traditional knowledge. If it were untraditional, we could not be sure the other person knew it and we could not take it for-granted. On the criterion of "What is assumed in speech?" we have an obligation to teach about the *Mayflower.* This technical principle for deciding what children need to know in order to join the literate speech community is, of course, just one principle for identifying the content we need to teach

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0406

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in the early grades. It does not include our ethical, civic, and aesthetic aspirations for education. But the technical principle is a big start. It is remarkable how much of the early curriculum in America can be built from this openly discussed technical principle, by simply asking the question, "Is this information often taken for granted in talk and writing addressed to a general literate audience?" As my colleagues at the Core Knowledge Foundation have shown, a very rich and interesting early education can be based on this principle. Striking examples of success from applying this approach can be found — disadvantaged students gaining ground, and all students gaining high literacy.

The states therefore need to agree with one another on a core of specifics. To do this, they will have to follow sounder principles than those that have produced current state standards. Current principles righteously proclaim their own virtue in being vague because they nurture the differences among children, leave freedom for the teacher and the district, and proclaim a commitment to "deeper" aims like critical thinking and understanding. These principles are unwitting masks for indecision and irresponsibility. Until they are removed, states can never reach decisions about the specific core content that the nation needs.

Currently, I know only a few persons in leadership positions who openly advocate that the states should agree on specific core content in all subjects in the early grades — Ruth Wattenberg, the brave editor of the *American Educator*, published by the American Federation of Teachers, and Diane Ravitch. More leaders should join them. In the face of high student mobility and the absolute need for literate background knowledge for enabling reading comprehension, those who present themselves as advocates of children and of the poor and the disadvantaged — all the many philanthropies and special educational organizations in the United States — should join forces and begin thinking the unthinkable about the early curriculum. Currently, these organizations support and encourage programs

0406

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that are often effective at the level of the individual school. But by remaining at that level, they ignore the huge problem of mobility.

These organizations might lobby the states to cooperate in deciding on a grade-by-grade sequence of specific core topics in the early grades. They might mobilize their formidable intellectual and financial resources to show the public that commonality of curriculum topics does not mean mind control and that different schools can teach the same topics in various ways and still attain the degree of commonality we need to use school time productively and foster high literacy. These advocates of the disadvantaged should make the public aware that our precious independence and diversity are not submerged when we have a common base of allusion, any more than they are submerged when we have a common base of spelling and punctuation. Liberal and conservative philanthropies and child advocacy organizations should take the lead in pursuing this forbidden subject, so critical to our future. We also need a thoughtful liberal-conservative coalition that puts the general welfare above narrow sectarian interests — as Horace Mann hoped. At stake are fairness, solidarity, and the chance to live up to our ideals.

can serve as the strongest possible antidote to poverty and to our frustrating race-based achievement gap.

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