

The Conservative Vision of Education

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The true aim of education is human flourishing; the liberal arts are meant to educate for liberty.

All theories and approaches to education rely on an implicit or explicit conception of human nature.

There is no neutrality in education. Public school education should be based on a compelling vision of the Founding and Natural Law.

Introduction

Thank you to Jason and Heritage. I have great admiration for Heritage, for Jason, Lindsey Burke, and Kevin Roberts. I spent a wonderful decade as a research fellow at Heritage, writings books on marriage, marriage and religious liberty, religious liberty and discrimination, and transgender ideology. After moving to the Ethics and Public Policy Center as president, I wrote a book on abortion. So, I have no idea why they invited me to keynote a gathering on education. I'm not an education policy wonk, though my work on religious liberty, discrimination, and gender ideology have all been crosscutting in recent years with ed policy. Still, I'm not an ed policy specialist *per se*. And while I've taught at several colleges and serve on the board of a state college in Florida, I'm not really an *education* expert either. In fact, I'm not

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even a decent educator: My wife and I tried homeschooling, but our eldest was still illiterate. So last month he started at a classical Catholic school about a half hour from us, and three weeks later, he was reading. So, to the professional educators in the room: Thank you—we amateurs need you.

I mention my son now being able to read as an example of one of the ends of education. Almost all my work takes its philosophical inspiration from Aristotle. Aristotle teaches that we most fully know something—most fully know what something is—by knowing what it’s for, by knowing what it does or is supposed to do in its fully flowering form. Our modern age doesn’t have much time for theories that embrace teleology, but in fact we rely upon it all the time. My wife and I live on a farm, with well over a hundred animals of a dozen different species, and knowing something about what the flourishing adult of the species looks like helps when trying to care for the newborn offspring—the bacon seeds, as I affectionately call them. And the same is true for humans.

The Aim of Education: Human Flourishing

So, when thinking about education, I start by thinking about what it means to be educated.

And the Phoenix Declaration gets this entirely correct in framing education in terms of knowledge, and the transcendentals: the true, the good, and the beautiful. Knowledge of the truth, and the truth about what is good and beautiful. We aren’t interested simply in producing citizens who will be law-abiding and employable—though we are interested in that. Sure, I needed to get my son to read in order for him to one day be employed and hopefully not in jail. But that’s not the most fundamental reason I want him to read. My wife and I are interested in raising children who will flourish, children who will flourish during their childhood, and also flourish as adults. My kids are six, four, three, one, and 27 weeks in utero. So, I don’t yet have first-hand experience of what that final outcome looks like. But I do have some goals and desires for my kids, some hopes and dreams.

My wife and I talk about what sorts of adults we want our kids to grow up to be. How nice it would be to call up our now-literate six-year-old when he’s in his twenties and ask what he’s up to. And to have him report not simply that he’s gainfully employed and un-incarcerated, but to hear him excitedly tell us about the latest books he’s reading, both the latest novel he’s engrossed in and the latest philosophical or scientific tome. To have him discuss the major themes, plot, and character development in the novel, the logical flaws he sees in the philosophy. To hear him tell us about the latest concert he attended, or the art museum exhibit he just visited, or the opera premier. To hear about

a new friendship he's forming—and not just friendship of utility or pleasure that Aristotle discusses, but the highest friendship, the friendship in pursuit of virtue. To hear about a new hobby, or sport, or instrument he's playing; not just passively consuming, but actively producing beauty, actively engaging in leisure. To hear about where he's volunteering his time, donating his money, serving his community. To hear about a girlfriend, or even better a wife, marriage, and kids—grandkids! To hear about the church he's attending, his small group or bible study, his prayer life. Something like that outcome would make me really rather happy as a father.

The Liberal Arts: Educating for Liberty. Now, my wife and I can't do this alone. Our kids will spend the majority of their waking hours in a school. And education isn't simply about teaching my son to read. Or to do math. Education is about formation. Forming a certain type of person. We all need formation, as none of us is born ready for freedom. Traditionally, the Liberal arts were not the Left-wing arts. Liberal was from the Latin *libertas*, for liberty, freedom. These were the arts that would make us free. Free from slavery to our passions and desires. Free from blind acquiescence to the spirit of the age. Free from whatever the latest fad or ideology happens to be. And notice how it was people with a real liberal arts education who first saw through and resisted the trans and other woke ideologies that we were told were the Right Side of History.

So liberal arts are meant to educate us for liberty, because none of us are born ready for freedom. We all need formation. And that means the school that we send our son to—and next fall will send our daughter to—is partnering with my wife and me to form a certain type of human being. One [that] I hope will be marked by wonder, curiosity, virtue, and life-long learning.

The Good Life. What I sketched in talking about what we want for our kids as they grow—the books, the operas, the friendships, the marriage, the religion, etc.—is a modern-day thumbnail of what the Greeks called *eudemonia*, or human flourishing. More recent natural law theorists would term those specific items “basic human goods.” The ends and purposes the pursuit of which constitutes a good life. Now, I think there's no such thing as The Good Life, Capital TGL, in the singular, but good lives, plural. Because the human good is variegated, in the sense of lots of different legitimate ways to pursue happiness, lots of legitimate ways to mix the pursuit of knowledge and beauty and friendship and hobbies and family and God. Now to say that the human good is variegated—that there are multiple basic human goods and an infinite number of ways and circumstances in which they can be realized and instantiated—is in no way to suggest that it is subjective or relative or unknowable. Nor is it to say or imply that all

values are equal or ‘who’s to say?’ Why do I mention any of this? Because we need some fundamental, truthful conception of the human good and its variegated nature, an account of human nature and human flourishing, if we’re going to educate human beings.

Here’s the reality: Every theory and approach to education has an account of human nature and human flourishing, either implicit or explicit, either true or false. Rousseau has an account; Randi Weingarten has an account; Aristotle has an account; Augustine and Aquinas have accounts. Some are better than others. And when I say a theory of human nature, I mean a theory both of our potentialities and capabilities, and of our fallenness, frailties, and fallibility. Augustine has a leg up on Rousseau there. If every theory of and approach to education is based at least on an implicit account of human nature and flourishing, I want a true one, and I think it better if we’re explicit about it.

Moral Formation in K–12 Education. Which is simply to say that as parents, as teachers, as administrators, and trustees, we need to have some conception of what the goal is, what type of human being we’re seeking to form. Absent that, we will simply not know what type of formation to provide. This is most the case in K–12 education, but even in higher ed, it’ll be the case. But stick with K–12 for now. K–12 education will never simply be about knowledge in some limited sense of imparting information. It will always be formation in the largest sense possible. As students spend the majority of their waking hours at schools, they’re not just learning book knowledge, they’re learning what it means to be human. Not simply learning to read but learning how to be human. Which also means learning morality. Obviously schools ‘teach’ morality when they promulgate and enforce the rules that govern the classroom and the playground. Or decide on things like dress codes.

But moral formation at schools isn’t simply a matter of what the official school conduct code is. It’s much more expansive, because all of the educational choices we make at school are also moral choices, and these choices ineluctably contribute to the moral formation of students. What books we read, what music we listen to, what art we look at, what holidays we celebrate (what are we celebrating today, for example? Washington’s Birthday, or President’s Day), what history we teach and how we teach it, what literature we teach and how we teach it. Every aspect of the curriculum will form a student’s reason and will, his or her knowledge and morals. And for that matter, I’d add that these choices influence students’ tastes, their aesthetic judgments and preferences—these aren’t given either, but need to be formed.

The Centrality of Character Formation. A school could form people in The Gospel of Hedonism or The Gospel of Autonomy or The Gospel of Expressive Individualism. Or it could form students in what Servais Pincketers called Freedom for Excellence: self-directed action toward the truly good and beautiful. The Phoenix Declaration is admirably clear in the centrality of Character Formation to all education. And that's right at home in the American tradition in the best sense. Consider the 2nd verse of America the Beautiful where we ask God to "confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law." The distinction between liberty and license was something every one of our Founders could explicate. And yet we now have entire generations of Americans—including our political and legal elites—who can't fathom that distinction.

Education Is Political

But I want to head off a misunderstanding. Education rightly understood is not just intellectual and moral and aesthetic formation for the sake of personal fulfillment understood as a private matter. It's not as if this is for the sake of human flourishing and a good life for my kids, just as such, as isolated individuals. It's also a civilizational matter. Education is formation—intellectual, moral, aesthetic—and political. And I emphasize this because it strikes me that for several generations now, many schools and the education establishment have been corrupting students. Think Howard Zinn on America or the 1619 Project or any of the manifold efforts over the past several decades to turn students against love of their country in particular or civilization more broadly: "Hey Ho, Western Civ has gotta go." And obviously more recently all the woke nonsense. With intersectionality hierarchies of victim-class status and deconstructing sources of meaning and truth and critical theories rightly viewed as cynical. A large part of primary education is to help people to understand and become contributing participants in their civilization and their political community. A sound education forms people in ways that enable them to inherit and pass on the traditions that are central to their civilization and polity. Capable of inheriting, hence a heritage. Capable of passing it on, hence a tradition, *traditio*. As students, we need to inherit the best of western civilization broadly and America in particular and then be able to pass it on to our children and grandchildren. And again, the Phoenix Declaration is entirely correct to emphasize the importance of cultural transmission and citizenship. A large part of this will be how we teach history and civics, obviously, but also how we teach religion and philosophy, art and music, theatre and literature. To have our heritage

and tradition be *living*. To have it become part of our moral imagination, part of our effective memory. Directing a natural love for our own, for our heritage, our country.

No Neutrality in Education. If you've tracked with me so far, then it's clear that all education is moral education and civic education. This means that there is no neutrality. What do I mean by this? Obviously, given what I've said about education really being human formation relying on at least an implicit view of human nature and human flourishing, there's no neutrality on that. Given what I've said about education as human formation, and therefore moral formation, there's no neutrality on that either. Given what I've said about education as human formation, and therefore political or civilizational formation, there's no neutrality there. But some people try to get around this: "We'll just teach facts, not values; facts are objective, and therefore neutral; values are subjective and therefore biased." "We'll just avoid any controversial issues; we can bracket the divisive issues and just focus [on] reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic." "We'll just leave sex ed to parents at home." "We'll just not 'do' religion: no prayer, no mention of God, no discussion of theology." But each of these "we'll just..." is itself not neutral. To think you can teach "facts" without "values" is to take a side in a heated debate. And it's to form students to believe that there are value-free "facts" out there. To avoid "controversial issues"—or even better, to avoid them while simultaneously 'just' doing anti-bullying education surrounding them—is not neutral but is to teach something about them. For the past several decades, the Left has smuggled in radical ideologies under the guise of neutrality, inside a Trojan Horse of Rawlsian Public Reason, and other theories meant to displace traditional American values.

Now some on the Right have responded to the past decade of truly insane ideologies by thinking we can 'return' to neutrality. But we can't 'return' to something that never was. Nor should we attempt the impossible. What your honor code demands, what expectations for speech on campus you set (both freedoms for ideas and duties for responsible and respectful rhetoric), what your dress code and co-educational spaces and events look like—there is no way for any institution to claim to simply have a "neutral" policy on these matters. Likewise, there is no neutral curriculum. Or neutral approach to teaching a curriculum.

No Neutrality on Religion. But let me really emphasize the point: There is no neutrality on religion, though in some quarters this is denied or simply not acknowledged. Too many people on the Left (and sadly many on the Right) think that the policies that our Supreme Court imposed on public schools with respect to prayer and religion and God are somehow "neutral." They

are not. Even apart from any particular doctrinal commitments or doctrinal teaching or catechesis—so leaving the substance aside for a moment, simply as a formal matter—treating education as something that can be done without relation to deeper metaphysical questions is not neutral. Treating education as something that can be conducted without invoking divine assistance is not neutral. Habituating students to view their “secular” studies as utterly disconnected from their one-hour a week “Sunday school” instructions is to already put your thumb on the scale for a certain worldview. Because Protestants and Catholics disagreed with each other, and non-Christians disagreed with Christians, all about the precise doctrines of God, we somehow thought that simply ignoring God would therefore be “neutral.” But it is not. It teaches and habituates a certain functional atheism.

The Parental Role in Education. If there is no neutrality, then how do we get there? Especially since it’s not as if we all agree! The Phoenix Declaration points the way in calling for parental choice and responsibility. Funding students, not systems, as our mantra goes. There’s a reason why, and again our friend Aristotle can help. Parents are the primary educators of their children. If you have a sound understanding of what marriage is, and what the family is, and how parents have authority, both rights and duties, with respect to their children, then you can understand that anything the state does with respect to education has to be to support the parental role in education, not to supplant or displace or undermine it. This is why we used to say that teachers acted *in loco parentis*. For too long, the entire way we’ve structured education has been to supplant, displace, and eventually undermine parents. Anything we can do to create more parental choice, more competition between schools, more *a la carte* options for parents and students, the better. Let schools offer competing pedagogical approaches, and curriculums, and views about the human person, and beliefs about God. And let parents choose which school best reinforces their own beliefs and desires for their kids. We have Protestant friends who send their kids to our son’s classical Catholic school precisely because our son’s school isn’t “neutral” nor attempting an impossible neutrality. Precisely in its Catholicism, it is about 90-some percent (if not more) in accordance with their beliefs and values. Rather than least-common denominator education—which the Courts and bad mid-century theorists gave us—real educational pluralism allows for more parents to find the type of school that most closely aligns with their rightful desires for the intellectual and moral formation of their children.

Limits on Parental Authority. But there are limits. Twenty years ago, I was an undergrad at Princeton. I can still remember hearing Hadley Arkes, visiting professor from Amherst at the time, explain (riffing on *Oliver Twist*)

that Fagin's School of Pickpocketry couldn't be included in any legitimate system of education. Even with the best of school choice programs, there are limits. There are limits on parental authority—and therefore limits on choice. To take a non-educational example: There are limits on parental authority to chemically or surgically mutilate the body of a child. And therefore, a limit on their choice to do so. So, if we acknowledge limits on parental authority and choice, then the state will have to make judgments about what is in, and what is out. A decade ago, many of us were concerned that blue states, and possibly even the federal government, would say that Orthodox Jewish institutions, faithful Roman Catholic and Evangelical and Latter-Day Saint institutions, would all be 'out' because of beliefs and policies on marriage and sexuality. The solution wasn't to insist on government agnosticism all the way down—it's impossible and self-defeating. The solution was to do precisely what we did: explain why these schools were not engaged in anything remotely akin to the racist policies that Bob Jones University once enforced, and thus why they should remain fully free to educate in accord with their beliefs.

Revival of Classical and Faith-based Schools. So, one solution to the reality that there is no neutrality is to empower parents as much as possible, within due limits, and let schools compete. There's a reason why classical schools and faith-based schools that take their faiths seriously are having a revival right now. This isn't a one-size fits all solution—precisely because we do in fact disagree about some of the finer details of human nature and divine nature.

Public Governance of Public Schools. Yet even with the best school choice programs, and even with accurate standards of what is in (Catholic schools) and what is out (Fagin's School of Pickpocketry), many families will opt for whatever the default is: public school. And so, we can't abandon public schools or their students. If anything, we need a resurgence in the public governance of public institutions. For the 85 to 90 percent of American children who still attend public schools, this is of utmost importance. I praised Jason and Lindsey and Heritage at the beginning of my remarks—Allow me some presidential privilege. I'm now President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and for 20 years Stanley Kurtz has been doing outstanding work on the public governance of public schools, both K-12 and higher ed, and I encourage you to google his name and his work. Stanley does this work because as we push for more and more educational choice, we must also, simultaneously, insist on making our public schools less bad. There is no reason to pretend that the public shouldn't—doesn't—get to govern public institutions.

I accepted the invitation to serve as a Trustee of New College of Florida because there's no reason why public universities in red states should be as woke as the Ivy League, and I wanted to do my part in this essential reform effort. For too long, red state governors and legislators have been asleep at the wheel—governors simply appointing their biggest donors to the boards, who then won't rock the boat, and just want tickets to football games and tailgates and ribbon-cuttings, and then allowing the faculty—overwhelmingly left-wing—to do as they please, politicizing every aspect of university life. No. Higher ed needs to be accountable to the citizens and the legislatures and the boards.

So, too, K-12. We live in Loudoun County, Virginia, and we could never send our kids to the local public schools. But we're fortunate. We had the option to try homeschooling; we have the resources to pay tuition to send our kids to a classical Catholic school. But less than a mile from our house is a trailer park. And right across the street is a public elementary school. The kids in that trailer park are not being homeschooled or sent to private school. What goes on across the street in that public school matters because those kids matter. I have no doubt that many of the offensive and corrupting books that Ron DeSantis and the Florida legislature have banned from kindergartens and grade schools in Florida are celebrated in Loudoun. And thus, it's entirely proper for the Phoenix Declaration to call for transparency and accountability and excellence: Yes, we need to govern our government-run schools.

The Founding as the Basis for Reviving Public School Education. And that means we'll need to think about what a justified vision of education, based on a justified account of human nature and human flourishing, looks like for public institutions in our pluralistic republic. It can't mean neutrality—that's impossible. It can't mean woke—that's evil. I want to suggest that our Founding itself, and its reference to the laws of nature and Nature's God, can help provide a starting point. Using natural law thinking and the broad tradition of ethical monotheism, along with a rich celebration of our nation's heritage, while still providing lots of space for students, parents, and families to fill in the gaps by doing their own fine-tuning on specific doctrines or dogmas. Which is simply to say that a tolerant, capacious mere Judeo-Christian, pro-West, pro-America foundation can provide the basic vision. But again, while this would be better than what we currently have, even saying the finer details can be filled in later is to take a position on how important those details are. But what's the alternative? Government-run schools that impose every last jot and tittle of our particular denomination? Which one? Or Government-run schools that aspire to a faux neutrality?

So, in addition to the bedrock parental authority argument, we can add a second: Because no single government-run institution can consistently over time get the morality and theology correct, we have reason to prefer decentralization, and parental choice. Yes, eventually it might be nice to not have the government run schools, but what should we do in the meantime? So, if we are going to have government-run institutions, we'll need to be able to settle, and yes, it's settling, for a broadly good-enough middle ground—that doesn't actively teach anything that is false but also doesn't aspire to teach every last truth.

Hiring for Mission. And let me here emphasize that just as personnel is policy when it comes to politics, so too faculty is curriculum and formation when it comes to education. This is why it is so vitally important that private schools, especially religious schools, be able to hire for mission. Staffing the schools with teachers who actually believe and live it out. But so too with public schools. Our first act as a new board for NCF [New College of Florida] was to fire the president so we could search for a president who would implement our vision for higher education. And let me here emphasize that it is precisely because of my understanding of human nature and flourishing, not out of any skepticism or faux neutrality about human nature and the human good, that I defend robust protections for academic freedom and freedom of speech on college campuses. Public K–12 education is different from public university education. The formation K–12 students need, and the formation university students need, is different. And yes, having to listen to a speaker with whom you disagree on a college campus is an important part of your formation.

Final Remarks

Let me close with three final remarks, just noting three areas of concern for the future:

A Lost Generation. First, the role of technology. Obviously AI is on the minds of every university professor I know, especially in how things like Chat-GPT have facilitated cheating. But I think an even broader concern needs to be on how new technologies threaten to undermine the real agency of our students. Without intending to sound hyperbolic, I do have concerns about a lost generation who simply never develops basic life skills, hobbies, pursuits, and intellectual passions, because everything has been outsourced to screens and thumbs. AI has amazing potential for ala carte instruction and personalized tutors. But there are also real risks of an overly technologized childhood. My EPPC colleague has a new book out this Spring

from Penguin Random House, titled *The Tech Exit*, all about the benefits of as low-tech a childhood as possible. I encourage you all to read it when it comes out, and to think carefully about what the tech policy at your schools should be. A Chromebook for every student benefits Google, no doubt, but has it actually benefited our students? We should be neither luddites nor uncritical first adopters when it comes to new technologies.

The Instrumentalization of Education. Second, many of our students approach education as if it were an instrumental good. Some of this is clearly the fault of our teachers. Visit most any elite college campus, and there is a clear careerist bias. School and college isn't about education for virtue, or even liberty, but educating for McKinsey. It's hard to blame students for taking such an instrumental approach to their own educations when their teachers already instrumentalize education in other ways: with partisanship and indoctrination. Not real appropriation of truths. Manipulation of students to accept and repeat the politically correct answer. Manipulation, not illumination, "now I see for myself" ... the truth. Helping people to see, and to then appropriate that truth into their lives.

Depression Amongst Young People. Third, we still live in an age that is skeptical of truth. But the fever is breaking. There really are truths. Empirical truths, asking what is a woman shouldn't trip up a SCOTUS nominee, and moral truths, condemning terrorism and campus rallies in support of terrorists, shouldn't trip up an Ivy League President. The silly season of skepticism and relativism and subjectivism that we have all lived through hasn't yielded a boon for happiness. Rather, our young people are more depressed than ever.

Now is the time to go on offense in offering a compelling vision about the truth of the human person. That opening sketch of what my wife and I desire for our kids is not unique or idiosyncratic to us. Most parents want something like that for their kids. And our nation needs it. Students who know and love the good, the true, and the beautiful. Students who form real friendships, intellectual friendships, moral friendships. Students who love their country, their home. Students ready to serve. To serve neighbor, serve country, serve God. That's the conservative vision of education. That's why we're here tonight. Thank you for helping to make this vision a reality.

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