

The Original Intent of American Education

A new school year is beginning in Arizona. What is the purpose of the education the students will be receiving? There seems to be an often expressed opinion among many educators and policy makers now that the primary purpose is to train and prepare students for the “good-paying jobs” in the competitive global job market of the future.



How does this compare with the views of many of the well-educated and well-read Founders of this country? One of America’s most significant early documents is the Northwest Ordinance, approved by the pre-Constitution Congress in July, 1787. The third article in that ordinance definitively states: “*Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall ever be encouraged.*” Hillsdale College President, and educator, Larry P. Arnn, in his 2004 book *Liberty and Learning*, explains, “[Article Three] provides not only the justification for...but also the purpose of the schools. If they are to be useful to good government and the happiness of mankind, they must be conducive to ‘religion, morality, and knowledge’.”

The prevailing view among the Founders was that a knowledgeable *and* moral citizenry is the surest way to preserve liberty, good government, and the necessary habits of individual and civic responsibility. Here is a small, but representative, sampling of relevant quotes from the Founding Generation:

“In a government founded on the sovereignty of the people, the education of youth is an object of the first importance.” James Monroe, Virginia General Assembly address, 1801

“It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences, but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with...an inviolable attachment to their own country.” Noah Webster, *On the Education of Youth in America*, 1788

“...the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.” Benjamin Rush, *On the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, 1786

Dr. Arnn adds these observations: “We think differently about the purpose of education today, to say the least. Prayer is now banned in public schools. Morality, when it is taught, is conceived as a subjective thing, or yet more commonly as a newly invented thing to be found under the heading ‘political correctness’. The ideas of ‘knowledge’, ‘good government’, and ‘happiness’ are now subjected to... deconstruction and historicism. But regardless how much we think differently today about the purpose of education and its relation to ‘religion, morality, and knowledge’, the Founders agree with us about one thing: ...education is *important*. ... [They] regarded education to be of the utmost importance.”

And *what* our young people are learning in school is of the utmost importance also. As the Sage of Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, points out in a letter written in 1750, “...*nothing is of more importance for the public weal, than to form and train up youth in wisdom and virtue.*”

Priscilla Poesse, Americanism Chair

Note: Hillsdale offers an informative free online lecture series, *A Proper Understanding of K-12 Education*, available at online.hillsdale.edu.