

“A Change in Our Thinking About Elementary Education”

Remarks on Receiving the James Bryant Conant Award

By E.D. Hirsch



On July 10, 2012, Core Knowledge Founder E. D. Hirsch, Jr. received the Education Commission of the States (ECS) James Bryant Conant Award for his decades of work in developing and spreading the idea that students become proficient readers and learners only when they also have wide-ranging background knowledge. The award, named for the former Harvard University president and co-founder of ECS, James Bryant Conant, is one of the most prestigious in the national education community, and recognizes individuals who have made outstanding contributions to American education. Hirsch joined an esteemed list of past recipients that includes Thurgood Marshall, Fred Rogers, Claiborne Pell, and TedSizer.

On behalf of my colleagues at the Core Knowledge Foundation, and the University of Virginia, I want to thank ECS for adding my name to a list that includes some of the most admirable people in American education. When I first heard of this honor, I identified with Dr. Johnson and his wife. There was a fable that the wife of the great dictionary maker found him in bed with another woman. “Dr. Johnson,” she said, “I’m surprised.” “No, Madam,” he said “I am surprised. You are astonished.” When I heard of this award, I was both!

The remarkable list of predecessors includes Ralph Tyler, who started NAEP among many other things, and Thurgood Marshall who won the verdict in *Brown v Board of Education* among many other things. As I ponder the other distinguished names, I see a few patterns in the themes that have mattered most to ECS and to the country – the goals and policies that have dominated our educational efforts since 1977 when the Conant Awards began.

I have lived through those decades and more – beginning as a first grader in 1934 at our neighborhood public school, the Lennox School in Memphis, Tennessee. There I learned that it didn’t matter who my parents were, or where *their* parents came from. My teachers explained that we were all free Americans, where one person is just as good as another. I quickly and permanently bought into that idea.

The public school teachers of those days committed themselves very powerfully to the Americanizing mission of the schools. And that aim was also reflected in our schoolbooks. This Americanizing mission could be called nationalism, but it was different in a fundamental way from the nationalism being taught in other lands which had not been created from the egg of the authority of written documents devoted to universal principles. Those other countries, including France, existed before the Enlightenment. They were not conceived in liberty and dedicated to abstract propositions. Their students were being taught a more tribalistic form of nationalism, founded on language,

place and parentage, history, blood and soil – going back to the root sense of nation – *natio* – meaning birth.

Here in the New World, we were told, it wasn't your birth that determined who you were, but your ability and diligence, and you pledged your allegiance to a multi-national community based on freedom and equality. The schools instilled in us an un-tribal patriotism, and a sense of equal worth that empowered some of us, including me, to rebel against our own parents, just as our predecessors rebelled against George the Third.

But this is not the occasion for narrating my history starting in first grade. More pertinent to the occasion is our common educational history since the Conant Awards began. Their most consistent and noble theme has been equality of educational opportunity.

That was the title of the Coleman Report of 1966, which showed authoritatively that during the 1960s

families had more impact on academic achievement than schools did. Yet the Conant awards show that we as a nation have remained dedicated to changing that result. Several Conant awardees besides Thurgood Marshall have devoted their lives to equal educational opportunity – including Carl Perkins whose name appears on the national Perkins Act of 1984 which aimed to improve the access for those who had been underserved in the past. It includes James Comer and Robert Slavin who have devoted their professional lives to equal educational opportunity, and it includes the redoubtable Kati Haycock who received the Conant Award three years ago. Despite our disappointingly slow progress, the goal of equal educational opportunity is never far from our minds. And I hope that you will think of the Core Knowledge effort by my colleagues and me as belonging to that common goal of equalizing educational opportunity.

As I discuss in my recent book, *The Making of Americans*, equal opportunity was a primary mission of our schools from the start – as they were conceived by Jefferson and Noah Webster. That was one of the two main aims. The first was to give each person an equal chance, and the second was to unite the huge spread-out country into a national community in which loyalty to that larger community would trump regional, local, and private interests. George Washington even left money for the schools in his will for the express purpose of “spreading systematic ideas through all parts of this rising Empire, thereby to do away with local attachments and State prejudices.”

You will hear tomorrow from Justice Sandra Day O'Connor about the civic mission of the schools. I want to devote my few remarks to the place of language mastery in achieving equal opportunity, greater civic participation and greater economic effectiveness. In the triad of reading, writing, and 'rithmetic, we are

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Those misconceptions have held us back. Overcoming those misconceptions is key to achieving language mastery for all. And language mastery is the key not only to citizenship, as Jefferson said, but to all of those information-age skills that have been termed 21st-century skills – critical thinking, the ability to work in teams, the ability to look things up, the ability to communicate well, and the ability to learn new skills readily. All of these skills depend on the possession of a large vocabulary.

I need hardly remind this group of that fact that our students' verbal scores declined in the late 70s and have stayed flat ever since. According to the Longitudinal

Survey of Youth, which correlates verbal test scores with income level and job competence – vocabulary size and reading comprehension are critical to raising student abilities and overcoming the achievement gap. No single general test of academic achievement is more highly correlated with income and civic competence than a verbal test such as the NAEP 12th-grade reading test.

Behind this correlation of verbal scores with life chances lies the deep truth that reading skill implies more than reading, and language implies more than language. A large vocabulary is, on average, the best single predictor of job competence and life chances. And a large vocabulary can only be gained by acquiring broad general knowledge, not by studying words. Nor can a large vocabulary be gained by practicing reading strategies and thinking skills – those dominant topics in our elementary schools.

Such how-to ideas are enormously attractive, but they have not worked, and cognitive science tells us that they cannot work. Broad substantive knowledge, not formal technique, is the key to achievement and equity.

In 1987, many thought that my book-length foray into education reform called *Cultural Literacy* was a book about the culture wars. That's why the cognitive scientist, Daniel Willingham, called it the most misunderstood education book in the past 50 years. What he had in mind was the mistaken assumption that the book was a reactionary tract about culture which supported a lily-white canon rather than being what it actually was – an explanation of the dependency of language mastery on broad general knowledge. That misunderstanding arose not just because the word “cultural” was in the book's title, and not just because the culture wars were in high gear when it came out, but also because the nature of reading was and still is deeply misunderstood by the general public and many educators.

It was an accident that my combination of research interests brought me into contact in the 1970s

with frontier studies the newly developing field of psycholinguistics. Only gradually, after my book came out, has the research evidence greatly accumulated and made overwhelmingly clear that the essence of language proficiency is NOT mastery of skills and strategies but rather of broad academic knowledge. Now, 25 years after the book came out, no knowledgeable cognitive scientist disputes that insight. But it was understandable when the book first appeared that many would have viewed it as an ideological tract rather than a scientific fact.

Unfortunately the scientific consensus has not fully made its way into the thinking of teachers and principals. Reading is still thought of as a skill which, once learned, enables you to understand language addressed to the general public – whether in print or over radio, TV or the Internet. But reading ability is

really two distinct abilities – decoding and comprehending. The single word “reading” has merged decoding and comprehending, causing us to assume that if students learn to decode well they can develop into good readers just by reading widely. But this is false.

Language proficiency is not just mastery of decoding but also a mastery of the broad knowledge that is taken for granted in speech and writing. Here's a quick example taken

from a British newspaper – *The Guardian*. As I read it to you, imagine that you are a disadvantaged student encountering a reading test like the NAEP.

“A trio of medium-pacers—two of them, Irfan Pathan, made man of the match for his five wickets. But this duo perished either side of lunch—the latter a little unfortunate to be adjudged leg-before—and with Andrew Symonds, too, being shown the dreaded finger off an inside edge, the inevitable beckoned, bar the pyrotechnics of Michael Clarke and the ninth wicket. Clarke clinically cut and drove to 10 fours in a 134-ball 81, before he stepped out to Kumble to present an easy stumping to Mahendra Singh Dhoni.”

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That passage reminds me of a comment made after a public lecture by Einstein: “I knew all the words. It was just how they were put together that baffled me.” My colleagues at Core Knowledge have shown that this is precisely the kind of bafflement felt by disadvantaged children who encounter a passage on a reading test when they are unfamiliar with the background knowledge relevant to the passage.

If we consider the importance of unspoken, taken-for-granted knowledge in understanding language, and if we also consider the demonstrated importance of language comprehension for 21st-century skills, we are led to the firm conclusion that early schooling ought to be more focused on the systematic imparting of knowledge, and less on strategies and test-taking techniques.

I want to close with a final thought about the historical context of today’s Conant award. As Bob Dylan said: “The times they are a changin’.” Until very recently it would have been unthinkable to select me or anyone with views like mine to receive the Conant Award. I’ve had little to say in my work about such current reforms as charter schools, or teacher quality, or accountability systems, or school-management policies. My persistent theme has been that only a knowledge-based approach to early schooling, starting in preschool and pursued systematically over several years, can overcome the language gap caused by family disadvantage. The findings of the Coleman Report can be reversed, but only if we abandon the how-to approach that we have followed for many decades.

Today’s award suggests that we are beginning to understand that the key to lifting achievement and

narrowing the gap is a systematic approach to imparting knowledge, starting in preschool; that not only our curricula but also our tests need to be based on the knowledge domains of a coherent curriculum.

Thanks to a recent report in the *New York Times*, more people are now aware of the results of trials with the Core Knowledge early literacy program which have been stunning. And now with the Common Core standards, there’s a new emphasis on introducing broad general knowledge within the early literacy block.

Despite the criticisms that have been launched against the new Common Core standards, the principles behind them are sound – especially in their call for more units on science and history within the class hours devoted to language arts. For if general knowledge is the key to language proficiency, then early language arts needs to help impart general knowledge coherently and systematically.

Some have rightly warned that merely following the letter and not the spirit of the new Common Core standards will leave us just where we already are. For if we teach helter-skelter bits of non-fiction (with the how-to theory of reading) rather than coherently developing student knowledge, we will not really have changed our practices or our results.

Perhaps your selecting me for this year’s Conant Award can be interpreted as marking a change in our collective thinking about elementary education, away from how-to strategies and towards the much more interesting task of imparting knowledge. If that turns out to be true, you will have given me much more than this great honor. You will have renewed my optimism about the future of our schools and country. So I thank you from the bottom of my heart.



ECS Chairman John Hickenlooper, the Governor of Colorado, congratulates E.D. Hirsch on receiving the James Bryant Conant Award.