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ABSTRACT

An extensive study of humanities education in the nation's public schools, commissioned by the United States Congress, concludes that history, literature, and languages are inadequately taught, and most students fail to learn important knowledge about their shared past and culture. Data from a nation-wide survey reveal gross ignorance of major events, personalities, documents, and literary classics in Western civiliation. More than two-thirds of American 17-year-olds are unable to place the Civil War within the correct half-century or are unable to identify the Reformation or Magna Carta. In general, a long-standing purpose of U.S. public education--transmission of a common culture to all students--is in jeopardy. This study points to emphasis on process over content as the fundamental deficiency in humanities education. Curriculum guides and textbooks emphasize practical skills at the expense of knowledge; processes in thinking and doing have a higher priority than subject matter. The content-poor curriculum of elementary and secondary schools is reinforced by teacher education programs that stress how to teach rather than what shall be taught. Recommendations for strengthening humanities education in public schools pertain to: (1) expansion of time allocated to the study of history, literature, and foreign languages; (2) improvement of textbook content; and (3) reform of teacher education programs to emphasize courses in subject areas of the humanities. There is a critical need to attend to what students learn as well as how they learn. Further, school districts are called upon to invest less in mid-level administrators and more in paraprofessionals and aides who can relieve teachers of burdensome custodial and clerical tasks. The purposes are to provide teachers with more time to study, think, and plan and to enhance their authority and performance in the classroom. A six-page news release is appended and summarizes the main ideas and findings of this report on humanities education. (JP)

American Memory

A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools

Lynne V. Cheney
Chairman

National Endowment for the Humanities

THE MYSTIC CHORDS OF MEMORY, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Abraham Lincoln
First Inaugural Address
March 4, 1861

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Foreword

In 1985, the Congress of the United States instructed the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts to study the state of humanities and arts education in the nation's public schools. *American Memory* is the result of the National Endowment for the Humanities' efforts.

We at NEH undertook this study enthusiastically. In 1984, under the chairmanship of my predecessor William Bennett, NEH had issued *To Reclaim a Legacy*, a report on the humanities in higher education. It was time for us to consider elementary and secondary schools. Indeed, for many reasons, it seemed urgent that we do so. A number of thoughtful observers were expressing alarm about the state of the humanities in our schools, but history and literature were not emerging as central concerns in the various state, regional, and national commissions looking at education. Educational reform was in the air, but the humanities were seldom a part of it.

And so it was with the sense of being about an important task that an advisory group on history and literature first met on March 2, 1987. I convened this group twice more. Our discussions were informed by readings, statistical data, short presentations by outside experts, and by the results of an NEH-funded nationwide test of what seventeen-year-olds know about history and literature.

The advisory group on history and literature represented all parts of the country and a variety of educational institutions. Among its members were the principal of an inner-city elementary school and the dean of a college in the Rocky

Mountains; a school superintendent from Maine, a high school teacher from Iowa, a faculty member from the graduate school of education at the University of California. There were humanities scholars in the group from colleges and universities across the nation.

In addition to the advisory group on history and literature, I called together a group on foreign language education. This group, which met once, was also composed of scholars, teachers, and administrators.

Under the auspices of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies in Washington, D.C., I also met with heads of major humanities organizations and leaders of foundations that have supported humanities education. We discussed the topics this report should cover.

At all the meetings held in connection with this report, there was lively debate. The members of these groups brought a variety of perspectives to the meetings, and they did not reach consensus on every point. Given their diversity, however, there was a surprising amount of agreement. Most important, they agreed that there is reason for serious concern about humanities education in U.S. schools.

I am deeply appreciative of the counsel that the members of these different groups provided. I would particularly like to express gratitude to those advisory group members who, upon receiving a draft of this report, made thoughtful commentary upon it. I called upon their observations and insights time and again while preparing the final report.

I would also like to thank the outside presenters who informed and enlivened our discussions. In addition, I am grateful to the NEH staff, particularly to Celeste Colgan, who directed this project; to John Agresto and Tom Kingston, who made important contributions to the report; and to Jeff Thomas and Anne Gwaltney, who provided valuable research assistance.

The contributions of still one other group should be acknowledged: the many scholars and teachers I have talked with as I have traveled to various parts of the country on NEH business. Their words and thoughts also inform this report.

Indebted as I am to all these people, responsibility for this report and its conclusions is mine alone.

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The Humanities and the Nation

A refusal to remember," according to Nobel Prize poet Czeslaw Milosz, is a primary characteristic of our age. Certainly there is abundant evidence that it is a primary characteristic of our nation. Teachers tell of students who do not know that George Washington led American forces in the Revolutionary War; that there was a World War I; that Spanish, not Latin, is the principal language in Latin America. Nationwide polls show startling gaps in knowledge. In a recent survey done for the Hearst Corporation, 45 percent of those polled thought that Karl Marx's phrase "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" is in the U.S. Constitution.

Cultural memory flourishes or declines for many reasons, but among the most important is what happens in our schools. Long relied upon to transmit knowledge of the past to upcoming generations, our schools today appear to be about a different task. Instead of preserving the past, they more often disregard it, sometimes in the name of "progress"—the idea that today has little to learn from yesterday. But usually the culprit is "process"—the belief that we can teach our children *how* to think without troubling them to learn anything worth thinking about, the belief that we can teach them *how* to understand the world in which they live without conveying to them the events and ideas that have brought it into existence.

The culprit is "process"–the belief that we can teach our children *how* to think without troubling them to learn anything worth thinking about.

To be sure, countless people within our schools resist this approach. I have met school administrators who are convinced that education should be about mastery of knowledge. I have met teachers who, deeply knowledgeable themselves about the roots

of our culture, are passionate about wanting their students to be. In Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, I encountered a classics teacher who is determined to teach Greek. For bureaucratic reasons, she has to offer it outside regular school hours; and so she comes early each day to teach a class before school and stays late to teach another after—even though this means she teaches eight classes a day.

Among good teachers, the idea persists that teaching is about transmitting culture. What I heard from them again and again, however, is how many obstacles stand in the way of doing the kind of teaching they think is important.

An educational system that devalues knowledge of the past produces students who do not firmly grasp the facts of history and literature. A 1987 study, based on a survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reports that more than two-thirds of the nation's seventeen-year-olds are unable to locate the Civil War within the correct half-century. More than two-thirds cannot identify the Reformation or *Magna Carta*. By vast majorities, students demonstrate unfamiliarity with writers whose works are regarded as classics: Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Austen, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and Cather.

A system of education that fails to nurture memory of the past denies its students the satisfactions of mature thought, an attachment to abiding concerns, a perspective on human existence.

Dates and names are not all that students should know, but such facts are a beginning, an initial connection to the sweep of human experience. And why is it important that they make that connection? Why is it important that they—that we—remember?

The first argument is the simplest: to realize our human potential. We alone of all creatures have the ability to break out of the narrow circle of the moment, and until we do, until we reach beyond ourselves, we are limited and immature. "To know nothing of what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child," Cicero wrote. Or as Santayana put it, "[W]hen experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual."

By reaching into the past, we affirm our humanity. And we inevitably come to the essence of it. Because we cannot encompass the totality of other lives and times, we strip away the thousand details of existence and come to its heart. We come to the age-old questions, to the enduring subjects of both historian and poet. How do we know our duty? How do we deal with our fate? How do we give our lives meaning and dignity? Pondering these questions, we realize others have pondered them. We realize that we are not the first to know joy and sadness, not the first to set out on the human journey.

The past also offers lessons, and although we shall surely dispute what they are, even as we do so we enlarge our perspective on the present. What does it mean that Rome fell? And Athens? What does it mean for us? The Framers of the Constitution debated such questions two hundred years ago in Philadelphia. Their achievement is reminder that history is not merely what has happened; it is a way of finding paths into the future.

A system of education that fails to nurture memory of the past denies its students a great deal: the satisfactions of mature thought, an attachment to abiding concerns, a perspective on human existence. As advisory group member Linda Miller observed, "We take a tremendous risk of national character by failing to ground our students in history and literature."

Indeed, we put our sense of nationhood at risk by failing to familiarize our young people with the story of how the society in which they live came to be. Knowledge of the ideas that have molded us and the ideals that have mattered to us functions as a kind of civic glue. Our history and literature give us symbols to share; they help us all, no matter how diverse our backgrounds, feel part of a common undertaking. Advisory group member Bernard Weisberger cited a passage from *The Promised Land* in which Mary Antin, who came to this country from Poland as a child, told of first learning about George Washington: "I discovered...that I was more nobly related than I had ever supposed...," Antin wrote. "George Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens."

By allowing the erosion of historical consciousness, we do to ourselves what an unfriendly nation bent on our destruction might. Novelist Milan Kundera has described how the Soviet Union has methodically set about destroying the historical memory of Czechoslovakia, proscribing her literature and tearing down historical monuments, in order to destroy the Czech sense of nationhood.

In our schools today we run the danger of unwittingly proscribing our own heritage.

In our schools today we run the danger of unwittingly proscribing our own heritage. The purpose of this report is to describe how this has happened and to suggest ways it can be remedied.

History and Literature

IN 1892, A SCHOOL REFORM COMMISSION MET that was distinguished in its membership and decided in its views. Known as the Committee of Ten, the panel called together scholars from universities—a young Princeton professor named Woodrow Wilson was among them—and representatives from the schools. As participants saw it, cultural content should be central to what was taught and learned. The Committee emphasized the importance of literature (as well as "training in expression") and recommended an eight-year course of history. This plan of study, the Committee stressed, was for *all* students, not just for those who would be attending college.

For a time a curriculum of the kind the Committee of Ten endorsed prevailed. Gradually, however, an opposing view came to dominate: Schools should concern themselves not with intellectual life, but with practical life. As millions of children who

would once have been outside the educational system enrolled in the schools, progressive educators argued that what most students needed was not study in history and literature, but preparation for homemaking and for work in trades.

"Skill" training began to drive more traditional offerings, like ancient history, out of the curriculum. Indeed, the very concept of history became submerged in "social studies," a term that emphasizes the present rather than the past; English courses, transformed into "language arts," stressed communication rather than literature; and as the schools adopted a fundamentally different orientation from colleges and universities, humanities scholars turned away from precollegiate education. Curricula, textbooks, and teacher training became the domain of professional educationists.

Under their guidance, schools began to emphasize the process of learning rather than its content. Both are important, extremely important in the teaching of history and literature. But so much emphasis has been placed on process that content has been seriously neglected. One can see the imbalance in the opening pages of a teacher's guide to a widely used textbook series. Scores of skills to be taught are set forth: everything from drawing conclusions and predicting outcomes to filling in forms and compiling recipes. The cultural content of learning, on the other hand, is given only brief mention.

Both the process and the content of learning are important, but so much emphasis has been placed on process that content has been seriously neglected.

"How to identify the sequential order of events," "how to explore alternatives," "how to follow directions involving substeps" —lists of such skills fill up page after page of the curriculum guides and scope-and-sequence charts that direct the activity of classrooms. Textbooks used to teach teachers are similarly oriented. Paying only passing regard to the content of education, they concentrate on process-centered "instructional objectives," "learning activities," "teaching strategies," and "evaluative measures."

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of how process-driven our schools have become is the dominant role played by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). In the 1985-86 school year, almost 1.7 million students took the two-and-a-half-hour examination; and many of them, and many of their parents and teachers as well, regarded it as the single most crucial experience of their academic lives. Looming over our educational landscape is an examination that, in its verbal component, carefully avoids assessing substantive knowledge gained from course work. Whether test-takers have studied the Civil War, learned about *Magna Carta*, or read *Macbeth* are matters to which the SAT is studiously indifferent.

Skills—such as reading comprehension, which the SAT assesses—are crucial, I repeat. But the content of education also deserves close attention. Indeed, common sense argues that the two are connected. How can mental skills be developed except through exercise on materials that are challenging and substantial?

In fact, the SAT itself has provided dramatic indication of this link. Between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, the national average of the verbal SAT scores declined by some fifty points. This same period also saw the substantive content of education diminish rapidly in the schools. Responding to cries for relevance as well as to the idea that young people learn best by following their own inclinations, schools began offering an astonishing variety of ways to earn credit—and conveying no notion that some kinds of knowledge are more important than others. Students could take courses in jewelry making and blanket crocheting to earn credits toward a high school diploma.

The fall in SAT scores that paralleled this phenomenon stimulated a national debate about our schools. More than any other single factor, it generated the educational reform movement of the last few years.

Current reformers have emphasized the necessity of paying close attention to *what* our children learn as well as to *how* they learn, but their message has proved difficult to translate into the classroom. In Texas, new "Rules for Curriculum" have been issued that set forth "essential elements" for three English/language arts courses required in high schools: how "to vary rate of reading according to purpose," how "to recognize relevant details," for example. Among the essential elements—more than one hundred in all—there is just one mention of major literary works and authors.

If history gives us perspective on our lives, then shouldn't every young person be encouraged to study it? If literature connects us to permanent concerns, then shouldn't every young person read it?

This particular document is not an anomaly. It reflects an unhappy aspect of educational reform: Education specialists who think in terms of process rather than content have often been put in charge of seeing to it that our schools improve. This delegation of authority has been especially painful for teachers who value knowledge of the disciplines they teach, but now find themselves increasingly regulated by a bureaucracy that has other interests.

Recent attempts to improve our schools have also stumbled over organizational structures previously set in place by those who wanted the system to take a less academic direction. Across the nation, graduation requirements have been tightened for social studies and English/language arts: In 1981-82, the average number of credits required was 2.6 for social studies and 3.6 for English/language arts; in 1984-85, the figures were 2.8 and 3.8 respectively. One assumes that policy makers increased requirements so that students would take a greater number of academic courses; but that is not necessarily the effect since "social studies" and "English/language arts" often describe courses that are decidedly unacademic. In Maine, for example, "Introductions to Careers" and "Business Communications" can partially satisfy graduation requirements in social studies and English/language arts.

Words have consequences. Broad terms like "social studies" make it difficult to raise standards concerned with content. For years

courses in everything from driver education to "values clarification" have been making their way into curricula under the social studies umbrella. "Language arts" has been somewhat less a cover for non-academic courses, but that term too complicates the task of restoring study of the humanities to a central role. Indeed, such terminology makes it difficult even to assess accurately whether progress is being made.

The problem extends far beyond vocabulary into matters of equity. Not all students are fulfilling graduation requirements with courses like "Introductions to Careers" and "Business Communications." Only certain groups are: those in "general education" and "vocational education" programs. For these students—more than 60 percent of those enrolled in our schools—the core of education thus becomes different from that studied by their peers in academic programs. In history and literature, it inevitably becomes diminished.

By their nature, the humanities disciplines ought to be the easiest to bring to everyone. While some students will need more help than others with the language of Shakespeare's plays, for example, the themes that animate the plays—love, honor, betrayal, revenge—are familiar to all and interesting to all. Moreover, once the case for humanities education has been made, the conclusion that it is for every student seems inevitable. If history gives us perspective on our lives, then shouldn't every young person be encouraged to study it? If literature connects us to permanent concerns, then shouldn't every young person read it? "To make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere" is the way Matthew Arnold stated the goal. No other ambition suits a democracy well.

World competition is not just about dollars but about ideas.

The educational reform movement of the 1980s has rightfully espoused the cause of educational equity. It has, in general, raised the expectations we have for our schools. Perhaps most important, it has kept the subject of education in the forefront of national attention by making a pragmatic and important case: Our country's economic role in the world will surely decline unless we improve American education.

One effect of this approach, however, has been to concentrate reform effort on basic skills, mathematics, and science. While these aspects of schooling assuredly deserve close attention, it is now time to elaborate the argument; to be clear that world competition is not just about dollars but about ideas. Our students need to know what those ideas are, need to understand our democratic institutions, to know their origins in Western thought, to be familiar with how and why other cultures have evolved differently from our own. They need to read great works of literature, thus confronting questions of good and evil, freedom and responsibility that have determined the character of people and nations. These needs cannot be met in an elementary and secondary curriculum that typically devotes no more than three or four years to history in a twelve-year sequence. They

cannot be met in a curriculum that takes a hit and miss—and mostly miss—approach to literature.

It is sometimes argued that the story of our nation's past and the Western tradition that forms our heritage is irrelevant to a population that increasingly comes from other traditions, but I would argue that the opposite is true. While we need to know as much as we can about all people everywhere, our first goal has to be to comprehend this nation, all its virtues and faults, all its glories and failures. We can only build from where we are, and to do so intelligently requires that we—that all of us—know where we are.

On a trip to Los Angeles, I met with a group of students from John Marshall High School who made this point with good sense and simplicity. They had won the 1987 U.S. Academic Decathlon, accomplishing this feat by becoming experts on the U.S. Constitution. They not only knew its provisions, they knew its origins in European thought. They knew the fascination the Framers of the Constitution had with the classical world.

More than three-quarters of the John Marshall student body learned English as a second language. Thirty percent of the students on the decathlon team were born in other countries. And so, playing the devil's advocate, I asked them why, given their diverse backgrounds, they had become devoted students of this country's founding. They seemed to think this an odd question; but finally one of them answered, "Because we're here."

These students want to understand the society in which they live—a society which they, repeating a pattern basic to the American story, will shape for generations to follow.

Nothing has greater potential for giving young people the expanded awareness they need than foreign language study.

Foreign Languages

AMERICAN MEMORY IS A RICH AND INTRICATE CONSTRUCT, reaching far into the life and ideas of other nations. "The pilgrims did not sail into view out of the void, their minds blank as the Atlantic sky, ready to build a new world out of nothing but whatever they could find lying about the ground in eastern Massachusetts," historian Paul Gagnon has written. "They and all the others who landed in the Western hemisphere were shaped and scarred by tens of centuries of social, literary, political, and religious experience."

Self-knowledge requires that we understand other cultures. Daily life increasingly demands it. The world our children live and work in will seem even smaller than the one we know now. Its parts will be even more tightly linked by technology; its citizens, more interdependent.

Nothing has greater potential for giving young people the expanded awareness they need than foreign language study—an area that was once considered an important part of education. In 1915, for example, 37 percent of this country's high school stu-

dents were studying Latin, and 36 percent were studying a modern foreign language. As the population of the schools expanded and curricula became less academic, these percentages plummeted. There was a reversal when the launching of Sputnik made foreign language knowledge seem useful for a time, but generally the trend has been downward. In 1978, only 21 percent of high school students were enrolled in either a classical or modern foreign language.

The last few years have seen a substantial revival:

—In Virginia, the Department of Education reported that 42 percent of all secondary students were studying a foreign language in 1986—the highest since World War II.

—In North Carolina, the legislature has ordered every school district to offer foreign language instruction from kindergarten through high school by 1992.

—The number of students taking the National Latin Exam has increased from 9,000 to over 61,000 during the last nine years.

—Nationwide, 29 percent of high school students were enrolled in foreign language classes in 1985-86. This represents a 38 percent increase since 1978.

—Severe shortages of foreign language teachers are occurring and threaten to become worse, particularly in parts of the country where expanded programs are under way.

Studying a second language gives us greater mastery over our own speech, helps us shape our thoughts with greater precision and our expressions with greater eloquence.

Characteristic of the current revival is a practical, often vocational approach to foreign language education. Students take Latin to improve SAT scores. They see modern foreign languages as a key to employment opportunities. Schools and colleges that once concentrated on literature now offer such courses as "Spanish for Hotel Management."

At all educational levels, oral proficiency is being emphasized. To aid in the task of producing speakers of other languages, foreign language educators are concentrating on examinations that assess a student's oral command.

Laudable as the goal of producing proficient speakers is, the concentration on it does raise concerns. Shouldn't reading also be stressed? Shouldn't cultural study? Indeed, without cultural awareness, can a person become an effective speaker? As advisory group member Myriam Met, a coordinator of foreign languages, observed, "In order to speak to someone meaningfully and communicate purposefully, you have to know a great deal about the cultural perspective that person brings."

Just as there are teachers of history and literature committed to teaching culturally significant materials, so there are foreign

language teachers determined to make culture the content of foreign language education. As their students begin to explore the rich storehouse a second language unlocks, they also acquire the facts, myths, metaphors, and allusions that make them effective speakers.

Teachers who saw interest in foreign language instruction increase after Sputnik only to decline a few years later want to insure that current interest endures. Thus they emphasize the lasting value of foreign language study as well as its immediate practical benefits: Studying a second language gives us greater mastery over our own speech, helps us shape our thoughts with greater precision and our expressions with greater eloquence Studying a foreign language also provides insight into the nature of language itself, into its power to shape ideas and experience.

A broad vision of foreign language study also includes the great texts of other cultures. The ability to read them with understanding requires years of studying both language and culture, but starting foreign language education in elementary school, as many localities are beginning to do, will allow students time to become sufficiently knowledgeable.

In a letter to Joseph Priestley, Thomas Jefferson noted that reading classical authors in the original was "a sublime luxury." The same is true for reading the great texts of Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese and Japanese. Valuable as they are in translation, the great texts are more valuable still when encountered as they were written; when words, thoughts, and feelings pass directly from mind to mind.

Even at beginning levels, students should be made aware that foreign language study provides more than practical skills. It can be a way of understanding ourselves and others. It can be, as Jefferson put it, "a rich source of delight."

Textbooks

It has been the object to obtain as wide a range of leading authors as possible, to present the best specimens of style," begins the *McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader* used around the turn of this century. In books like McGuffey's, children encountered Longfellow, Hawthorne, Alcott, Dickens, and Shakespeare. They read stirring speeches, stories about heroes, and selections from the Bible. To be sure, the reading books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also contained stories and essays that have since, deservedly, faded into oblivion; but at least half the content of these readers was composed of enduring literature, education historian Diane Ravitch reported to the advisory group on history and literature.

Far from providing "the best specimens of style," modern readers usually offer prose that satisfies "readability formulas."

Not so today. In the basal readers most widely used now, 10 percent or less of the content is classic children's literature. The emphasis in current readers is overwhelmingly on contemporary writing, generally by writers whose names are unknown outside the textbook industry. They produce a variety of materials, mostly aimed at developing skills, everything from how to recognize cause and effect to how to make grocery lists and use the telephone book.

Far from providing "the best specimens of style," modern readers usually offer prose that satisfies "readability formulas." These calculations, which dictate sentence length, word length, and the number of new words that can be introduced, can lay waste to even the best of stories. After a readability formula has been applied, for example, Aesop's fable about the tortoise and the hare becomes:

Rabbit said, "I can run. I can run fast. You can't run fast."
Turtle said, "Look Rabbit. See the park. You and I will run. We'll run to the park."
Rabbit said, "I want to stop. I'll stop here. I can run, but Turtle can't. I can get to the park fast."
Turtle said, "I can't run fast. But I will not stop. Rabbit can't see me. I'll get to the park."

With vital connections and colorful words lost, what was once meaningful and compelling becomes pointless and dull.

If there were persuasive evidence that using readability formulas is the most effective way to teach children to read, one would be tempted to let well-written prose wait for another day. In fact, recent research suggests that chopping up sentences sometimes confuses young readers. Extreme restrictions on vocabulary can leave them—or anyone—mystified. One beginning-level book's version of "The Shoemaker and the Elves" illustrates why: Apparently for readability's sake, the story contains no references to elves, shoemakers, or even shoes.

Most elementary reading books contain little literature; most social studies texts in the early grades contain little history. Dominated by a concept called "expanding environments," they report on such matters as where cars come from and where letters go; and they do so in ways meant to develop "human-relations skills" (like "recognizing interdependence among people") or "life skills" (like "addressing an envelope"). These textbooks belabor what is obvious even to six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds: that people live in families, for example, or that children go to school.

Textbooks are tangible evidence of how little we are doing to make our children shareholders in their cultural heritage.

It is hard to imagine that youngsters are spurred on to learning by these textbooks. What we give them to read seems particularly vacuous when compared to what grade-schoolers once studied. In the early decades of this century, they read myths, fables, stories from the distant past, and tales of heroes. They learned about Daedalus and King Arthur, George Washington and Joan of Arc, exercising their imaginations and beginning to develop a sense of life in other times.

Textbooks used to teach American history are also disappointing. The advisory group on history and literature looked at samples used in high schools. They were large (weighing about three pounds each), heavy with facts, but seldom were those facts made part of a compelling narrative, part of a drama with individuals at center stage. The human ambitions and aspirations that are both the motivating force of history and its fascination were largely absent. One textbook's account of the Constitutional Convention, for example, mentioned only James Madison's age and the fact that he took notes. A second recognized him as a "profound student of government," credited him with being "the Father of the Constitution," but provided no further explanation. A third set forth his contributions to the Convention in some detail, but beyond describing him as "the most astute politi-

cal thinker of his day" gave little sense of the character of this shy and driven man.

Missing also was a sense of the significance of the historical record. A reader was left with little notion of the ideas that inform our institutions, the arguments and debates that helped shape the kind of nation we are, the reasons behind the choices we have made or why those choices are important. As NEH Deputy Chairman John Agresto, observed. "At the end of each chapter, I could imagine any student saying, 'So what?' "

Good, even excellent textbooks do exist, but they are the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, textbooks used in U.S. schools are poor in content, and what content they do contain is not presented in a way to make anyone care to remember it. Thought by many to be the primary determinant of what is taught in U.S. classrooms, textbooks are tangible evidence of how little we are doing to make our children shareholders in their cultural heritage.

How do textbooks come about?

PUBLISHERS ARE FREQUENTLY BLAMED FOR TEXTBOOKS. It should be noted, however, that when they decide to put out new books or new series, they first consider what various states and localities say they want. As textbook consultant Harriet Tyson-Bernstein explained to the advisory group, publishers look to state and district curriculum guides and adoption checklists for guidance. Curriculum guides, thick manuals full of lists and charts produced by education specialists, set forth what students are to know—skills for the most part, though in the case of history there will often be many pages of topics to be covered. Checklists detail what adoption committees look for, including whether or not textbooks fulfill the requirements of the curriculum guides.

Name will be heaped upon name, cause upon cause, until the textbook becomes an overcrowded flea market of disconnected facts.

Many checklists specify reading levels, thus bringing readability formulas into play. Checklists also provide a way for various interest groups to make their influence felt. Feminists, environmentalists, ethnic minorities, nutritionists—all have concerns, often important ones. But adding them to the checklist of textbook requirements frequently results in what critics call the "mentioning" problem. A native American will be mentioned or a suffragist pictured, but no full account given of his or her contributions. Name will be heaped upon name, cause upon cause, until the textbook becomes an overcrowded flea market of disconnected facts.

Many checklists have an entry about whether the textbook is likely to engage students; but as one item among many, it is of no more consequence than whether the textbook has a recent copyright date (the most common question on checklists) or whether it will withstand wear and tear. Even if adoption committees were to

focus more on content and quality of writing, one has to wonder how textbook editors and writers could meet their expectations. They have dozens of curriculum guides and adoption checklists to try to satisfy as they work. Some are more important than others. More than twenty states adopt textbooks on a statewide basis; and when those states are large and the number of textbooks they approve for each subject is small—as in Texas and California—their demands receive extra attention. But since publishers want to sell books in as many places as possible, editors and writers must also try to keep the requirements of other states and localities in mind. "They are so tied up in knots accommodating this cross-referencing that they forget they are editing real material or writing about real events," Tyson-Bernstein observed.

Fearful that controversy will keep them out of important markets, publishers have tried to avoid controversial subjects like religion. This strategy has come under attack in recent years as critics across the political spectrum have pointed out that history makes no sense unless the driving power of religious belief is taken into account. To describe the Crusades or the pilgrims or the Civil Rights movement without talking about religion is to distort the past, but wary textbook publishers have done it.

The "great textbook machine" grinds away, trying to satisfy almost every interest group imaginable—except our children.

Literature has also felt the effect of publishers' desire to avoid controversy. Author Ray Bradbury has recounted one publishing house's attempt to remove religious references from "The Fog Horn," a short story in which he described the illumination coming from a lighthouse as a "God-Light." Those seeing the light from a sea creature's perspective, Bradbury wrote in the story, would have felt they were in "the Presence." Editors who wanted to include "The Fog Horn" in a high school anthology deleted both "God-Light" and "the Presence." *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury's novel about censorship and book burning, has also been censored. Unbeknownst to him, editors over the years deleted some seventy-five separate sections they judged might cause offense. Observed Bradbury in a 1979 afterword to *Fahrenheit 451*, "There is more than one way to burn a book."

The committees who gather to make centralized textbook adoptions have a complicated task and insufficient time to complete it properly. Matching a single book against an elaborate curriculum guide might take months. Adoption committees seldom have months, at least not of full-time work; and they have many books to consider. And so committee members find themselves running down checklists and flipping through pages. Are women and blacks included? A picture of Susie King Taylor will satisfy—no matter that her contributions as a Civil War nurse are inadequately explained. Is this textbook up to date? A recent copyright will satisfy—no matter that the book has been changed only superficially since the last edition.

Even if textbook committees had time to do their assignments thoroughly, good textbooks would not likely be the result. Curric-

ulum guides that emphasize skills at the expense of content are not a proper matrix for producing textbooks that will teach either skills or content well. Nor can checklists that fail to set priorities produce textbooks in which essential matters receive proper attention. The "great textbook machine," as Tyson-Bernstein and Arthur Woodward described it in a recent article, is not geared to produce textbooks that are rich in intellectual content and interesting to read. It functions to perpetuate an idea of education that concentrates on skills. It grinds away, trying to satisfy almost every interest group imaginable—except our children.

What can be done?

ONE POSSIBILITY IS TO MOVE AWAY FROM CENTRALIZED ADOPTIONS. Let teachers and faculties decide what textbooks they will use and hope that when individuals and small groups choose, they will do so by asking a few important questions: Is this a book a child might love? Does it tell him or her about things that really matter?

But so long as there is centralized adoption anywhere, all textbooks will feel the effect. And it is hard to imagine adoption states, which gain power from the practice, all deciding simultaneously to give it up.

Let teachers enlighten their students with real books—real works by real authors in the same form in which they are read by the rest of us.

Another possible remedy is for that power to be used in a good cause. With the development of a new history curriculum, California is sending a powerful and simple message to textbook publishers: Give us books that engage students; give us books that put the facts of the past into compelling narratives and stimulating intellectual form; give us books that take religion into account and that make the problems and accomplishments of this country clear. Whether California's clout will be sufficient to get the machine to produce a largely unfamiliar product remains to be seen.

One step that should be taken is to assign textbooks a less important role. Let teachers enlighten their students with real books—real works by real authors in the same form in which they are read by the rest of us. Many teachers do this now, often paying for real books out of their own pockets since their schools' book budgets are consumed by textbooks.

Teachers who have tried it testify that students at all levels benefit when challenged by texts that are not only real, but great. High school teacher Richard Peters told the advisory group about using *The Federalist* to engage his students. A New York City teacher wrote in *American Educator* recently about her success in teaching *Great Expectations* to ninth graders in a New York City public school. An elementary teacher in South Carolina reported at an NEH institute that the *Aeneid* had held her students' interest better than any other material she had used.

History is full of stories of young people learning from great works. One thinks of Lincoln working his way through the Bible. Or one thinks of Frederick Douglass struggling through *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of classic orations used as a schoolbook in the nineteenth century. For both Lincoln and Douglass, these works were more than intellectual training ground. They were entrances to the past, doorways to memory. Through them lay worlds of parable and myth, warning and aspiration that neither man would ever forget.

Teachers

Miss Julia Mortimer, in Eudora Welty's novel *Losing Battles*, knew what teaching was about: "She didn't ever doubt but that all worth preserving is going to be preserved, and all we had to do was keep it going, right from where we are, one teacher on down to the next."

The idea of being transmitters of culture is difficult for today's humanities teachers to hold in mind. They are besieged by educational theorists, administrators, and bureaucrats, all determined that daily classroom activity take another direction. They are beset by curriculum guides that set forth behavioral objectives; by required textbooks that follow the curriculum guides; by teachers' guides to the textbooks that tell them what questions to ask, what answers to give, what skills to emphasize.

Good teachers tend to become subversives in such a system. Advisory group member Constance Matthews from Amherst-Pelham Regional School District in Massachusetts described how she, at another district earlier in her career, was presented with a class of eighth-grade boys, non-readers for the most part. Told not to veer from the prescribed—and deadly—curriculum and text, she joined in a conspiracy with the students, who were only too willing to conspire. To their enjoyment, as well as to their serious education, she led them through a year of "secret" readings in McGuffey's Readers.

In good schools, enlightened principals protect their teachers. "We just don't let her in the building," said the principal of a Colorado high school about the education specialist who occasionally attempts to bring "in-service" training to the school's teaching staff. All too often, though, good teachers—the ones

To find and bring into the classroom literature that is not in the textbooks takes time; to draw up plans for introducing students to original historical documents takes time; and time is the commodity teachers have least of.

who know and love their subjects and want above all else to teach them—have to endure distractions they regard as meaningless.

To find and bring into the classroom literature that is not in the textbooks takes time; to draw up plans for introducing students to original historical documents takes time; and time is the commodity teachers have least of. Even those who ignore official curriculum guides when they teach often have to file lesson plans that pay homage to them. And there are meetings to attend; parents to see; report cards, library fines, permission slips, and bus passes to worry about; lunchrooms to supervise; dances to chaperone. "Each of these duties, I know, seems minor," observed advisory group member Janice Baker, a teacher at the Baltimore School of the Arts; "but the result is an exasperating trivialization of one's time and energy."

How much easier, then, to use the textbook, to follow the teachers guide, to go with the curriculum chart that says students should practice "finding the main idea"—and never mind if the main idea is worth finding.

How are teachers trained and sustained?

To a lament that students do not know what the Reformation was or when the Civil War occurred, these teachers reply, "But they know how to look them up."

SOME TEACHERS ARE GLAD TO FOLLOW THE GUIDES and textbooks since their college years have left them unprepared to do otherwise. They have come through teacher preparation programs in which they have taken courses of dubious intellectual quality. Sometimes the subject matter is trivial, at least to judge from course titles like "Lettering, Posters, and Displays in the School Program." Usually the approach is at fault: Courses treat teaching and learning in abstraction, elevating process to dogma and elaborating it in scientific-sounding language. Those future teachers who assume there is significance here go forth armed with jargon and convinced that what matters is what students can *do* after a lesson rather than what they know. To a visiting government official's lament that students do not know what the Reformation was or when the Civil War occurred, they reply, "But they know how to look them up."

Most teachers I talked with, however, regarded most education courses as a waste of time, "cheap hoops," as Baltimore teacher Janice Baker put it, through which one must jump in order to enter the classroom. To be sure, there is one education course that teachers almost always said was valuable: practice teaching. Occasionally teachers cited methods courses as worthwhile—if they were taught by someone with classroom experience and directed toward practical rather than theoretical ends.

An elementary school teacher, expected to teach everything from history to mathematics, will typically have spent 41 percent of his or her time as an undergraduate taking courses in education. Many states require fewer education courses for secondary teachers than for elementary teachers, but in others the require-

ment is the same. Of concern for all levels of teaching is that requirements for education courses have increased in recent years. Colleges and universities in 1983 required their teacher candidates to have, on the average, four more hours in education courses than they did a decade earlier. They also required five more hours of practice teaching.

Time spent taking education courses is time that cannot be spent studying in content areas. Thus a survey of seventeen major institutions in the South showed that future teachers had a weaker general education curriculum than most arts and science graduates. Prospective teachers who majored in a content area (as opposed to education) took fewer credits in the major than most arts and science graduates and fewer courses at the upper level.

Whether teachers have strong majors is only one consideration in judging how well they know what they teach, because they can also be certified in other subjects. State requirements differ drastically, but in some localities, a few courses in a subject are considered sufficient qualification. School districts can demand more, but too often they do not. And too often, factors other than preparation in subject area are given consideration in hiring. Of particular concern to the history profession is the value placed on coaching ability when history teachers are hired. In a 1979 survey, 58 percent of the school superintendents in Iowa reported that the need to fill coaching positions sometimes (and some superintendents said frequently) led to the hiring of history teachers less competent in the subject than other candidates. One of every five history teachers in Iowa, the survey reported, had majored in physical education.

Time spent taking education courses is time that cannot be spent studying in content areas.

Teacher preparation requirements can leave teachers knowing less than they should about the subjects they teach; and, once on the job, they have insufficient encouragement to become more knowledgeable. Recertification requirements direct teachers toward courses in education rather than in history, literature, and foreign languages. Heavy classloads and an extraordinary number of paraprofessional demands often make the rigors of content-area study seem impossible in any case. "If you take a course with meaning, you need time to think and time to read," Janice Baker told the history and literature advisory group. "In education you can take three two-day workshops for three credits. It's more like buying credits than earning them."

Teacher preparation requirements can leave teachers knowing less than they should about the subjects they teach.

What can be done?

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS for preparing teachers usually give them too little time to study the subjects they will teach. These programs are also one factor discouraging bright people from entering the profession.

A number of colleges and universities have recently begun programs that try to solve this problem by improving the quality of

education courses. A few also offer financial incentives to good students who intend to become teachers. At Trinity University in Texas, for example, scholarships and forgivable loans are used to recruit high-ability students into a five-year teacher training program. Students first get a liberal arts degree; then they enter a fifth-year "clinical" program that stresses the practical aspects of teaching.

Various localities and states—Houston, Los Angeles, Arizona, and New Jersey, for example—have also begun alternative certification programs. Designed for those who have already completed a bachelor's degree, these programs allow a person to earn a teaching certificate without going through a traditional teacher education program. Alternative certification plans typically provide more experience in the classroom and fewer hours of education course work than do regular programs. A 1986 study reported that the alternative programs are producing competent and well-trained teachers with above average preparation in subject areas.

Positive as these results are, there was strong feeling in the advisory group on history and literature that finding ways to circumvent regular certification is a limited solution to the problem of attracting bright and knowledgeable teachers. The issue of certification must be faced head on, the group felt, if good teaching in the humanities, as well as other disciplines, is to thrive. As it is now, colleges of education and state education agencies are the strongest forces in determining who gets to teach in public schools. Horror stories growing out of this situation abound, and they almost always play on a single theme: that knowledgeable people with teaching skill cannot teach because they have not taken certain education courses—even when those courses are of no demonstrable use in making better teachers.

The process of certifying teachers must become independent of the colleges that prepare them.

We should do more than find alternative ways to get bright and knowledgeable people into classrooms. We should be sure that regular paths to certification are fashioned with but a single interest in mind: securing good teachers. This cannot be accomplished until the process of certifying teachers becomes independent of the colleges that prepare them.

The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy has funded a project to create tests that will serve as the basis for certification from a national board. This effort holds promise as a way of separating teacher training from teacher certification. Recent suggestions that only those who have completed approved education programs be allowed to take the tests are of concern, however, since such a requirement would allow colleges of education to continue in their role of not only training teachers but also recommending them for credentialing.

The Holmes Group, a consortium of education deans and chief academic officers from major research universities, has rightly stressed the importance of strong undergraduate education in academic disciplines for future teachers. But that group's empha-

sis on graduate study in education as the path to advancement in teaching is troubling. Surely the career path upward for teachers ought to lie at least as much in study of what is to be taught as in study of how to teach.

Securing and sustaining good teachers will require commitment from humanities faculties at colleges and universities. Future teachers must be of concern to them in a way they have not always been in the past. Observed Iowa teacher Richard Peters, "In college I was taught in very fine manner by my history teachers, but none of them felt that what I was going to do was important. They wanted to prepare me for graduate school, which was fine, but I wanted to be a high school teacher."

The ongoing intellectual lives of teachers must also be of concern to institutions of higher education. Faculty at many colleges and universities have taken part in programs that bring them together with teachers in classrooms, seminars, and institutes. Reports of these experiences are almost universally positive: Teachers profit from time spent studying the *Odyssey* or *Othello*; faculty members profit from time spent with intelligent, committed students who are also dedicated teachers.

Upon returning to their campuses, though, college and university faculty often find that time spent teaching teachers is not regarded by their peers as time spent seriously. When decisions are made about tenure or promotion, the person who has spent the summer doing research has the edge.

Humanities faculties in colleges and universities have a stake in helping to improve humanities teaching in our schools.

Surely this should change, if only as a matter of self-interest. If the humanities are not taught well in our schools, students will continue to arrive on campuses without knowledge and appreciation of them; and if they have not begun to see the value of the humanities by the time they enter college, they may well be uninterested in further study. The sharp decline in humanities enrollments and majors on the nation's campuses over the last twenty years should demonstrate that humanities faculties in colleges and universities have a stake in helping to improve humanities teaching in our schools.

Teachers must be relieved of too-heavy classloads and of the many non-teaching duties that clutter their days. They need "time to get ideas from each other, to learn what works and what doesn't," said Brooklyn elementary school principal Jo Bruno, an advisory group member. "We have to find creative ways to give people time to think and teach well," observed Maine high school teacher John Drisko, also a member of the advisory group.

Giving teachers more time need not mean spending more on education since what is already being spent is so clearly in need of reallocation. Between 1960 and 1984, while the number of teachers grew by 57 percent and the number of principals and supervisors by 79 percent, the number of other staffers, from curriculum specialists to supervisors of instruction, was up by almost 500 percent. Resources are increasingly being drawn into

salaries for people who are not in the classroom but who attempt to direct the activity going on there. Specialists in education for the most part, they inevitably steer in the direction of process rather than content, toward skills rather than substance. How much better to spend this money giving teachers time and resources so they can work out teaching methods and gain greater command of the subjects they teach. How much better to put teachers, rather than outsiders, in charge of the classroom.

There has been debate in recent years about whether teacher shortages lie ahead. In states where foreign language instruction has drastically expanded, there are already shortages that will undoubtedly become worse unless specific steps are taken to recruit and train a sufficient number of teachers. But for the humanities generally, the challenge is not quantity, but quality.

In the last advisory session on history and literature, Baltimore teacher Janice Baker told the group: "If you love some area of knowledge, and you'd love to bring other people around to thinking about what you love, then teaching is a great job." Our task is to find the men and women Baker described—and then to make sure that they flourish.

Recommendations

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mr. Bixby advises young Sam Clemens, "My boy, you've got to know the *shape* of the river perfectly. It's all there is to steer by on a very dark night. Everything else is blotted out and gone."

During the months of researching and writing this report, I thought often of the river captain's words. The idea I encountered repeatedly—that the purpose of education is to teach students how to think rather than imparting knowledge to them—is the equivalent of teaching them how to steer the steamboat without giving them any notion of the river. There are times when human beings can consult maps to figure out where they are going; but for the surest navigation, the shape must be in the mind.

Thomas Jefferson consulted no books when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. He did not need to; Locke was as familiar to him as Monticello. The Framers of the Constitution referred effortlessly to history as they debated. They knew the shape of the past, knew the shoals and sandbars on which other civilizations had run aground and determined to avoid them.

But one need not think of such august figures to understand the importance of knowledge internalized. We need only think of ourselves, of the thousand decisions life forces upon us. Shall I do this or shall I do that? How is it important for me to spend my time? What is it good to do? What is it noble to do? We cannot look the answers up. Life presses us on, and we have to decide according to what we know.

We would wish for our children that their decisions be informed not by the wisdom of the moment, but by the wisdom of the ages; and that is what we give them when we give them knowledge

of culture. The story of past lives and triumphs and failures, the great texts with their enduring themes—these do not necessarily provide *the* answers, but they are a rich context out of which our children's answers can come.

It is in this spirit, then, that the following recommendations are made:

I. More time should be devoted to the study of history, literature, and foreign languages.

—Much that is in school curricula now under the guise of "social studies" should be discarded and replaced with systematic study of history. What goes under the name of "social studies" in the early grades should be replaced with activities that involve imaginative thought and introduce children to great figures of the past.

—Both history and enduring works of literature should be a part of every school year and a part of every student's academic life.

—Foreign language study should start in grade school and continue through high school. From the beginning, it should teach students the history, literature, and thought of other nations.

II. Textbooks should be made more substantive.

—Reading textbooks should contain more recognizably good literature and less formulaic writing.

—History textbooks should present the events of the past so that their significance is clear. This means providing more sophisticated information than dates, names, and places. Textbooks should inform students about ideas and their consequences; about the effect of human personality; about what it is possible for men and women to accomplish.

—In literature, history, and foreign language classes, original works and original documents should be central to classroom instruction.

III. Teachers should be given opportunities to become more knowledgeable about the subjects that they teach.

—In their college years, future teachers should be freed from excessive study of pedagogy so that they can take more courses in subject areas like history, literature, French, and Spanish.

—Teacher preparation and teacher certification must be independent activities. This will help ensure that education courses

taken by prospective teachers are of value to effective teaching.

—Higher education liberal arts faculties must recognize their responsibility for the humanities education of future teachers. Further, these faculties must play a greater role in the continuing education of teachers.

—School districts should invest less in curriculum supervisors, instructional overseers, and other mid-level administrators and more in paraprofessionals and aides who can relieve teachers of time-consuming custodial and secretarial duties. This will help accomplish two important goals: It will give teachers time to study and think; and it will put them, rather than outside education specialists, in charge of what goes on in the classroom.

Because American education is—and should be—a local responsibility, implementation of these recommendations will fall largely to policy makers in the states, educators in the schools, and scholars in colleges and universities. Implementation will fall above all to local school boards, parents, and other concerned citizens.

But I do not mean merely to set an agenda for others. There are efforts that the National Endowment for the Humanities can and will undertake. Indeed, there are many we have already begun, such as seminars and institutes that provide teachers the opportunity to study important texts.

We all have a stake in seeing to it that the humanities are properly taught and thoroughly learned in our schools. We all have a stake in making sure our children know the shape of the river they are traveling.

Carrying that shape in memory will not guarantee wisdom or safety for them or any generation. But there are few surer guides through dark nights—or sunny days as well.

NEWS

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HUMANITIES ENDOWMENT CHAIRMAN CITES THREAT TO "AMERICAN MEMORY"
Report Calls for Changes in Teaching History, Literature and Languages in U.S. Public Schools

WASHINGTON, August 30 -- America's elementary and secondary schools are failing to teach students about their shared past and culture, says Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Cheney's comments appear in American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools, part of a Congressionally mandated study written by the NEH Chairman and released today. In it she says that history and literature are not being adequately taught in public schools.

The fundamental problem, Cheney says, is that our system of elementary and secondary education stresses skills rather than knowledge, based on the erroneous notion "that we can teach our children how to think without troubling them to learn anything worth thinking about ... (and) that we can teach them how to understand the world in which they live without conveying to them the events and ideas that have brought it into existence."

By emphasizing the process of learning over content, schools are producing students with startling gaps in knowledge of history and literature, the report says. Cheney cites data from an NEH-funded survey showing more than two-thirds of American 17-year-olds unable to place the Civil War within the correct half-century or unable to identify the Reformation or Magna Carta. The same survey showed that vast majorities of

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students are unfamiliar with writers whose works are regarded as classics: Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville and Austen.

American Memory identifies several reasons for the problems in humanities education: a curriculum that focuses on skills at the expense of knowledge; textbooks that contain little meaningful content; and a system of training and sustaining teachers that emphasizes how to teach rather than what shall be taught. The report recommends specific improvements in each of these areas.

Cheney wrote American Memory after consulting with two advisory groups of outstanding scholars, teachers and school administrators drawn from a variety of educational institutions. She also visited schools and talked with teachers around the country.

The report argues that both skills and knowledge are essential to education, and that both suffer when the content of learning is neglected. "How can mental skills be developed," Cheney asks, "except through exercise on materials that are challenging and substantial?"

Cheney urges that a proper balance between these two educational elements be restored. She writes, "A system of education that fails to nurture memory of the past denies its students a great deal: the satisfactions of mature thought, an attachment to abiding concerns, a perspective on human existence."

Knowledge of the past is also important to our nation's strength, the report says. "[T]he ideas that have molded us and the ideals that have mattered to us function ... as a kind of civic glue," Cheney writes. "Our history and our literature give us symbols to share; they help us all, no matter how diverse our backgrounds, feel part of a common undertaking."

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The educational reform movement of the 1980s has largely focused on improving math and science, arguing that these areas are critical to the nation's ability to compete in world markets. But such a view is limited, Cheney writes, because "world competition is not just about dollars but about ideas. Our students need to know what those ideas are, need to understand our democratic institutions, to know their origins in Western thought, to be familiar with how and why other cultures evolved differently from our own."

American Memory explains that problems in humanities education began early in this century with a gradual shift away from traditional, intellectual concerns and towards practical, skill training in U.S. public schools. In the process, history was submerged into "social studies," a term that emphasizes the present rather than the past, while English courses, transformed into "language arts," began to emphasize communications rather than literature.

Students in general education and vocational education programs -- more than 60 percent of the young people enrolled in our schools -- have particularly suffered from these changes. Students often fulfill graduation requirements in "social studies" and "English/language arts" with courses like "Introduction to Careers" and "Business Communications" and thus have even fewer opportunities to know about history and literature than their peers in college preparatory programs.

"If history gives us perspective on our lives, then shouldn't every young person be encouraged to study it?" Cheney writes. "If literature connects us to humankind's permanent concerns, then shouldn't every young person read it?"

While noting that foreign language study is experiencing a revival, the report expresses concern about its emphasis on skills as opposed to content. Speaking skills

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are of crucial importance, Cheney notes, but the substance of culture cannot be overlooked. "Indeed without cultural awareness can a person become an effective speaker of a foreign language?" she asks.

Reading textbooks used in most classrooms, the report says, contain few selections from classic children's literature -- or even much good prose. Likewise social studies textbooks used in early grades contain almost no history; instead they stress "human-relations skills" and "life skills." American history texts used in high schools are heavy with facts but often deficient in compelling narrative, the report says.

Cheney writes: "For the most part, textbooks used in U.S. schools are poor in content, and what content they do contain is not presented in a way to make anyone care to remember it.... (T)extbooks are tangible evidence of how little we are doing to make our children shareholders in our cultural heritage."

Turning to teachers, Cheney writes, "Among good teachers the idea persists that teaching is about transmitting culture. What I heard from them again and again, however, is how many obstacles stand in the way of doing the kind of teaching they think is important."

Primary among these difficulties are teacher preparation programs requiring courses that teachers often regard as useless and that consume time they might otherwise spend studying history, literature and languages. Recertification requirements also direct teachers toward courses in education rather than substantive study, Cheney observes.

Colleges and university humanities faculties have not played their proper role in training and sustaining good teachers, Cheney notes. "Future teachers must be of concern to them in a way they have not always been in the past," she writes.

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The report lists a number of recommendations for strengthening humanities education in the public schools:

* More time should be devoted to the study of history, literature, and foreign languages.

  o Much that is in school curricula now under the guise of "social studies" should be discarded and replaced with systematic study of history. What goes under the name of "social studies" in the early grades should be replaced with activities that involve imaginative thought and introduce children to great figures of the past.

  o Both history and enduring works of literature should be a part of every school year and a part of every student's academic life.

  o Foreign language study should start in grade school and continue through high school. From the beginning, it should teach students the history, literature, and thought of other nations.

* Textbooks should be made more substantive.

  o Reading textbooks should contain more recognizably good literature and less formulaic writing.

  o History textbooks should present the events of the past so that their significance is clear. This means providing more sophisticated information than dates, names, and places. Textbooks should inform students about ideas and their consequences; about the effect of human personality; about what it is possible for men and women to accomplish.

  o In literature, history, and foreign language classes, original works and original documents should be central to classroom instruction.

* Teachers should be given opportunities to become more knowledgeable about the subjects that they teach.

  o In their college years, future teachers should be freed from excessive study of pedagogy so that they can take more courses in subject areas like history, literature, French, and Spanish.

  o Teacher preparation and teacher certification must be independent activities. This will help to ensure that education courses taken by prospective teachers are of value to effective teaching.

  o Higher education liberal arts faculties must recognize their responsibility for the humanities education of future teachers. Further, these faculties must play a greater role in the continuing education of teachers.

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o School districts should invest less in curriculum supervisors, instructional overseers, and other mid-level administrators and more in paraprofessionals and aides who can relieve teachers of time-consuming custodial and secretarial duties. This will help accomplish two important goals: It will give teachers time to study and think; and it will put them, rather than outside education specialists, in charge of what goes on in the classroom.

Restoring the humanities to their proper place in America's elementary and secondary schools, Cheney argues, will help students acquire familiarity with the past that they will find useful in their lives.

"We would wish for our children that their decisions be informed not by the wisdom of the moment, but by the wisdom of the ages; and that is what we give them when we give them knowledge of culture," Cheney writes in the report's conclusion. "The story of past lives and triumphs and failures, the great texts with their enduring themes -- these do not provide the answers, but they are a rich context out of which our children's answers can come."

The National Endowment for the Humanities is an independent federal agency that supports education, scholarship, research and public programs in the humanities.

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