

LEAD THE NATION

A Vision for Wyoming Schools

Brian Schroeder, Superintendent of Public Instruction

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To Lead the Nation in Education: A Vision for Wyoming Schools

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There is something deep in the DNA and character of the Wyoming people that sets the stage for a model of education that could become the envy of our entire country. That is why I believe Wyoming is poised to lead the nation in education.

An example of that happened during the Covid Crisis: why did the Cowboy State lead the nation in the most in-person class time of any state in the union? Because when strong elements of our society put the pressure on to shut down our nation's schools, the people of Wyoming responded with equal pressure to keep our schools open!

In like manner, Wyoming schools can take the lead when they doggedly resist the cultural pressure to go in the same direction that other schools in the country are going in so many other areas as well.

But to do so, we're going to have to be focused like a laser beam on two things, and these two things are really two sides of the same coin, two edges of the same sword: the **purpose** of education and the **priority** of education.

First, we can lead the nation in education by being absolutely clear about and committed to the purpose of education, in regards to both our students and our schools.

The purpose of education with our students, in a nutshell, can be summed up in four words: *to learn to think*. That has been the purpose of education for over a thousand years. It has only been in the last hundred years that a progressive model shifted the paradigm.

Said historian David Barton, "Up until about the 1920's, the emphasis in education was on producing thinkers, not learners. The idea was that if kids could think, they could learn anything for themselves; but if the focus was on 'learning,' they would become gullible and passive, believing everything they heard and read."

He's right. The thrust of Aristotelian logic and the Socratic teaching method was always on developing thinkers. Socrates himself said, "I can't teach anyone anything, I can only make them think." But with Horace Mann in 1838 and after him, John Dewey, came a conflicting approach. And now we have a generation of young people (not all) in this country who not only can't think, they don't even want to.

But the great classical tradition was about teaching young minds how to learn from others so they could think for themselves.

In math, to learn means computation, to think means application. In history, learning is about what happened, thinking is about who told you what happened. In science, the learning side comes through observation while the thinking side comes through experimentation. In reading, it's not only learning how to read, but also distinguishing what is worth reading ... and what is not.

This is where the finer appetites are cultivated, because as C.S. Lewis reminded us, "We are far too easily pleased." So the more we expose our students to the "great books" of literature, which embody

some of the greatest thoughts from some of the greatest minds of all time, the more we teach kids *how to think*. And with few exceptions, once they've had steak, it will be hard for them to go back to hot dogs.

Moreover, if education's timeless purpose really is teaching thinking, then it is only logical that this would be rooted in teaching logic, because logic is simply the systematic "rules of thinking." But the discipline of logic is not easy, because thinking is not easy.

In fact, as Henry Ford said, "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason so few engage in it." Thomas Edison agreed: "There is no expedient," he said, "to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking."

Maybe that's why a wise man once said, "If you make people think they're thinking, they will love you; but if you really make people think, they will hate you."

Nevertheless, learning to think is the singular transcendent purpose of education as it relates to our students, and we will lead the nation as we stay married to that purpose.

But what about the purpose of education as it relates to our schools? Well that is determined by how our schools are positioned in our world, or how they should be positioned.

According to the vision of our Founding Fathers and early Americans, the local community schoolhouse was uniquely positioned to be an extension of and support for *the home* as well as an incubator for and bridge to *society*. That clarity is extremely significant, and Wyoming is one of the few places in our nation that still (for the most part) operates that way instinctively.

On the one hand, the schoolhouse is to reinforce the home – not compete with it or conflict with it. It is to help strengthen the institution of the family as the cornerstone of civilization, not marginalize it or replace it.

On the other hand, the schoolhouse is to be a launching pad into society – which means preparing our young people to be informed citizens, involved community members, consequential public servants, teachers of the next generation, committed participants of their faith communities, and great American patriots who love – not loathe – their country!

That of course necessitates a high-impact civics education. Preparing our young people for life in this state and in this country requires understanding the history and current events of both. It integrates both biography and geography in concert with the dynamics of citizenship and statesmanship, while concurrently becoming well-versed in the Constitutions of Wyoming and the United States.

This is where less is more, and where a depth-over-breadth approach is crucial. A strong civics education loses its power if it is cursory or survey-oriented; a shallow approach will have a superficial effect.

A saturation approach, however, across a child's formative years will produce a generation thoroughly equipped to carry on this great American experiment. But it must wash over them year after year like waves and hit them grade after grade in layers. Waves and layers, the key to a powerful civics education.

Moreover, schools that will lead this nation must be irrevocably protected by local control. I ask you, when you hear the words “public” in public school, does it mean (to you) *community* or *government*? Because originally it was supposed to connote “community.”

A public school was supposed to be a school for the public, i.e., the community. But centralization has shifted our public schools from being community schools to becoming government schools because a progressive, nationalized approach – bit-by-bit – chips away at local control.

The evangelists of secularism saw two institutions – government and education – as the perfect twin vehicles through which they would remake society in their image. What’s more, through this quiet revolution, they anticipated the American people would be sleeping at the wheel, and by the time they woke up, it would be too late.

So as the feds sink their hooks deeper and deeper in our schools, their strings become more and more attached. And the stage is then perfectly set for the social engineers to fundamentally transform our society – through our schools – into a world that is radically contrary to everything we hold dear.

But as William Bennet would often say, when the culture pushes hard against you and your family, you must push back just as hard.

If we don’t, not only does our society become increasingly toxic, but so do our schools. And it is alarming how many schools in this country have become some of the most toxic places on earth for a kid to have to endure.

Which is why the charter school movement is such a critical piece in this whole thing. It helps break the stronghold of centralization, moves things back to the parents and local control, and brings competition back into the picture.

If this is really about our kids, then territorialism has no place in this equation. This is not, and should never be, about public schools vs. private schools vs. parochial schools vs. homeschooling vs. charter schools vs. virtual schools vs. private tutoring.

It’s all of the above, because it’s always about what’s best for the child, and we all know that what’s best for one child is not necessarily what’s best for another.

Some kids, often in the very same family, do better in public schools than they do in private, and vice-versa. Some do better in home-schooling than they do in public or private settings, and some thrive in charter schools. Others do better with virtual education, while others need their own tutor.

But ultimately, the parents know their kids best, so it goes without saying that the decision should rest with them – not the government, school board, state educational system or any other outside entity. Our role as a society is to provide as many educational opportunities as possible for our families and kids, not limit or squelch those opportunities.

So a robust, vibrant educational paradigm will seek a myriad of options for its students and encourage all learning arenas. Conversely, anything that smacks of monolithic control is a major red flag.

We should be exceedingly wary, therefore, of any government system or political mindset that insists on dictating or controlling what those options will be (or won't be). More good schools make other schools better. It's like "iron sharpening iron", and all aspects of society – including education – improve when we let the free market work.

So we can lead this nation through our commitment to the original *purpose of education*, but to do so means we must be absolutely clear on that purpose, and then let it serve as the rudder of our ship.

Secondly, we as a state can lead this nation through an unwavering conviction about the *priority of education*.

And what is that priority? Quite simply and quite profoundly, it is that all-abiding relationship between the *students, the teachers and the parents*. The educational enterprise is a triangular relationship between all three, and only works well when all three work well together – students, teachers and parents.

Let's start with the *parents*, because that's where everything should start. The parents are the central piece in this equation because the parents are the boss. These are their kids, they pay the taxes, we work for them, we are accountable to them – *the parents are the owners of our schools*.

Those of us who may serve on school boards at the local level are not the owners of our schools – we are merely the agents or representatives of the owners. Some of us who serve in government at the state or federal level are not the owners of our schools – we are merely the guardians, there to protect and preserve local control and parental authority. Therefore, we serve the parents; therefore, we must listen closely and carefully to the parents.

And as we assume our rightful place, the schools can assume theirs. If the rightful place of the local community schoolhouse is as an extension of and support for the home, then our rightful place as board members and government leaders is to *remain ever-accountable to the heads of those homes*.

This of course means keeping our parents fully-informed and fully-engaged in the entire educational process. But it also means *parent responsibility* – parents must step up and take responsibility for their kids in all areas, but especially in the area of education!

The key is the parents – they always have been, they always will be. So the first side of that priority triangle is the parents.

The second side is the *teachers*. The most difficult job on earth (next to parenting) is teaching, and it has never been more difficult than it is now at this time in our country's history. Dr. Thomas Sowell once said, "Teaching is the hardest job in the world if you care, and the easiest if you don't."

Some years ago there was an article carried in a major national magazine about the highest stress jobs in America: first on the list was brain surgeons, second was air traffic controllers ... and third was teachers. And only a teacher knows.

So while we hold our teachers accountable (which we absolutely should), we must also thank them, honor them, care for them, support them, equip them, empower them, and pay them well! If we are to recruit

and retain the best and the brightest, we have to elevate them highly, propagate them strategically and compensate them adequately.

A teacher shortage presently is very real across the nation, and some are predicting it will emerge as a crisis of epoch proportions – others have concluded the crisis is already here, even in this state.

But where there is a cloud, there is always a silver lining, and the big one in the teacher shortage crisis came from the state of Tennessee via the Teacher Apprenticeship program they successfully pioneered.

In response to their own teacher shortage crisis, suffering 1,000-1,200 teacher vacancies each year, the Tennessee Department of Education targeted para-professionals, support staff, community members and high school students. Academic coursework via evening classes (all paid for) coupled with paid on-the-job training as an instructional aide working under a mentor/master teacher for two years, teacher apprentices not only got compensated for skills gained, but could potentially receive raises incrementally.

With apprentice candidates able to earn a living wage without accruing any debt, and begin teaching with only two years of prior experience, this revolutionary paradigm shift not only answered the teacher shortage problem in Tennessee, but has actually given them a surplus of teachers – they are now blessed with a waiting list!

Best of all, their success provided hopeful inspiration to other states to do the same, including Wyoming. So after working on our own model for months, the Wyoming Department of Education will be piloting our own teacher apprentice programs this fall (Sept., 2022) in three different districts. As we do, we will work out the kinks and tweak the program where needed, in hopes of a quality product that can then go statewide and take root.

So the second priority is our teachers. We must hail them as the unsung heroes that they are, and we must take good care of them. Many are exhausted, others are disheartened, some are disillusioned, and in parts of our state and country, they are leaving the teaching profession by the droves. This of course does not bode well for our students, which is the third side of that priority triangle.

We must do right by our students, and here the mission is clear: raising up a generation of young people who are well-grounded, culturally literate and career-ready.

Take the first part, becoming well-grounded. The formation of a child's character must be at the very center of all our educational efforts. Becoming well-educated is meaningless apart from virtue. Many of Hitler's SS Troops had Masters degrees, but they lacked a conscience. And what good are job skills if our kids don't have a strong work ethic?

Moreover, the historic education tradition was always about not only shaping the mind, but also improving the heart. And though heartwork is hard work, it *is* where the deeper and more important work happens.

So the character development and emotional intelligence of our students is the fabric of a well-grounded youngster – seeing them grow from selfish to unselfish, impatient to patient, dishonest to honest. The entire project is a journey from immaturity to maturity, which typically can't be rushed, and is usually better caught than taught.

After that, the next layer is the cultural literacy piece. As E.D. Hirsch taught us, there is a certain body of knowledge that students *must know* to be culturally literate. And in the seminal stages, at the very foundation, comes linguistic literacy, which being interpreted means ... reading and writing!

In real estate, it's location, location, location; in education, it's literacy, literacy, literacy! If the purpose of education is teaching thinking, then it begins with teaching reading. That's the foundation, and we must get really good at laying a strong foundation: *the literacy of every child in every classroom in every school in every district in every county*. This must be our standard, and we should not rest until we meet it.

And this is so doable because we know how to teach the science of reading – it's no longer a mystery or debate. We know what works and what doesn't work. The jury has long been in on this issue as well as the verdict! And the verdict is *structured literacy*, more commonly known as the phonetic approach. It bears much better fruit and produces far better results than all its competitors.

It is this conviction then that fuels the imminent launch at the WDE of a state-wide literacy campaign. Through the formation of a highly-energized workgroup, we will seek to clarify the focus and raise the intensity of our commitment to literacy excellence as the foundation of everything we do in our schools.

Through this campaign, we hope to tackle the three core pieces of a stellar literacy paradigm: (1) training literacy teachers in the most effective model, (2) teaching literacy in the most effective way, and (3) testing student literacy with the most effective assessment. Working with our schools, our homes and our legislative body, the vision will be to boast the finest reading-literacy program in the nation.

Because as Scripture says, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Which is why doing right by our students also means protecting the philosophical integrity of our classrooms. Said a voice from the past, "*The philosophy of the schoolroom in one generation becomes the philosophy of government in the next.*" In that timeless piece of social prophecy we find both a reminder and a warning. The reminder, worldviews matter; the warning, ideas have consequences.

We would not for a second teach the philosophy of Nazism or the tenets of the KKK as something for our kids to embrace; similarly we should not for a second teach any philosophy that has its roots in neo-Marxist dogma as something for our kids to embrace.

Would anyone be ok, for example, with our government leaders requiring us to deconstruct our racial and sexual identities, and rank ourselves according to our "power and privilege"? Then why would anyone be ok with an elementary school requiring the same of first graders, like what happened in Cupertino, California.

Would any of us be ok with our government telling our white teachers that they are guilty of "spirit murder" against black children? Then why would anyone be ok with school districts doing the same, as what happened in Seattle, Washington.

"The philosophy of the schoolroom in one generation becomes the philosophy of government in the next."

UCLA Law Professor and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris has proposed suspending private property rights, seizing land and wealth, and re-distributing them along racial lines. Critical race guru Ibram X. Kendi said, "In order to be truly antiracist, you also have to truly be anti-capitalist."

While critical race activists are teaching kids that they are largely defined by their skin color, gender activists are teaching kids that there are a great many genders, and that only they (the kids) know their true gender. Put it all together, and you have the perfect storm ...

Teenage girls are presently in the midst of the worst mental health crisis on record, with inordinate rates of anxiety, self-harm and clinical depression.

In the UK, in fact, there has been a decade-to-decade increase of over 4,400 percent in the number of adolescent girls seeking treatment at the United Kingdom's national gender clinic. At some of the top girls' schools in America, 15%, 20%, in one school 30% of the girls in the seventh grade identified as "trans". Right now, in fact, teen girls are leading the demographic claiming to have gender dysphoria.

No surprise though that such staggering levels of social contagion have a long history: anorexia and bulimia, for example, were spread the same way. Adolescent females who are more susceptible struggle socially and tend to hate their bodies. Combine that with a school environment where they can attain celebrity status by declaring a trans identity, combined with the teenage temptation to stick it to mom, combined with the intoxicating influence of social media where trans activists push the idea that starting a course of testosterone will cure a girl's problems – and truly, you have the perfect storm.

But we will lead the nation when we refuse to drink the kool-aid. As we swim upstream against this overwhelming cultural current and categorically reject the tenets of postmodernism with its nefarious ideologies, we lead the nation by refusing to bow to the spirit of the age. From that beachhead, we become well-positioned to lead the nation in some other key areas as well.

It is, of course, much easier to just go with the flow – there is far less consternation and stress in doing so. But that's not leadership, and it only further enables the cultural deception that's engulfing our schools. Our challenge is to stand in the gap and be the state who leads the nation out of this wilderness.

Finally, when it comes to doing right by our students, it must include making them *career-ready*. This is not, however, to be confused with being educated. Job-training and a solid liberal arts education are two different things. The one provides a foundation for the other; a truly well-educated child makes a better plumber, doctor, flight attendant, or business person.

Job-training is good, but education plus job-training is better. Getting a good education is essential, but getting a good education plus good job-training skills is crucial. So this cannot be an either/or proposition, it has to be *both* education *and* job-training.

The right kind of education will expand a child's horizons because it cultivates a greater sense of vision. From that of course comes a better sense of direction which, amongst other things, helps forge a path to future career possibilities. Hence, the inexorable links between a child's character-formation, cultural literacy and career-readiness.

Even though in the United States today roughly five million 16-24 year-olds are either out of school or unemployed, the landscape is changing. Driven by the increasingly obvious notion that young people should be able to explore their options long before they rack up huge student debt, we're witnessing a shift – the exponential expansion of a host of career exploration opportunities at the high school level.

And that is as it should be, because high school should be the transitional phase where students kick the tires and explore possibilities, where education and job-training both take place and come together.

High school should be the place where, on one track, we have the dual-concurrent high school/college courses preparing some for college while, on another track, we have a myriad of career and technical programs (via CTE or SkillsUSA) putting kids on various vocational paths.

High school should be the place where financial literacy is taught in tandem with business internships, preparing young entrepreneurs for a free market economy. It should be the place where FFA puts our youth into the agricultural pipeline, and where JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps) teaches the benefits of military service alongside the values of citizenship and patriotism.

It should be the place where foreign exchange opportunities open doors for our kids to see the world, experience other cultures and study abroad, whether that's through the Peace Corps, the Americorps, or, for students of faith, a short-term mission's trip with YWAM or their local churches.

If that's not enough, watch closely! In the near future, I believe you will begin witnessing our high schools embracing some innovative teacher apprenticeship programs. And what better place to "grow" the next generation of teachers than in our local community schoolhouses?!

So in terms of casting the first glimpses of a vision for a Wyoming education that can truly lead the nation, it will be framed by both the purpose of education and its priority. The *purpose* is "to learn to think," with all that that means and with all that that involves. The *priority* is the parents, the teachers and the students, and that critical relationship between each.

But since "everything rises or falls on leadership," such a vision is unsustainable apart from a brand of leadership that sustains it. And interactions over the past five months with many of our school leaders from around the state have yielded a strong consensus that a vacuum exists in high-impact school leadership training that needs to be filled in this regard.

So if the vision is to lead the nation in education, it will require a brand of leadership trained to do so. Hence the motivation to bring together an incredible taskforce of school leaders from around our state who can begin shaping a leadership training model at the Degree level (UW and our community colleges), the Department level (the WDE) and the District level (our local community schools) which dovetails with and complements each other, rather than operating in the traditional, isolated silo manner.

Moreover, a corresponding guiding principle will be for the degree and department levels to take their cues from the districts, rather than the other way around (bottom up rather than top down). Informed entirely by the insights and experiences of some of our veteran and most successful Wyoming school leaders, we will become poised to lead the nation.

That's the goal, that's the plan, that's the vision. The ultimate benefactors of course will be (first and foremost) our Wyoming families; from there, our local communities, this great state and our beloved nation.

May God bless our Wyoming schools!