



A REPUBLIC OF DUNCES?

By Rafael Heller | Mar 26, 2020 | Editor's Note

Has intellectual life in America declined to a new low? Tom Nichols, a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, certainly thinks so. As he writes in his 2017 best seller, *The Death of Expertise*, our “foundational knowledge” about history, geography, science, and many other subjects “has crashed through the floor of ‘uninformed,’ passed ‘misinformed’ on the way down, and is now plummeting to ‘aggressively wrong.’”

Thanks to Google and Wikipedia, argues Nichols, everyone can instantly access information that will permit them to challenge the expert consensus on just about anything. And thanks to the vastness of the internet, one can find “evidence” to justify any belief, from the idea that Obamacare establishes death panels, to the notion that vaccines cause autism, to the insistence that climate change is a hoax. “People don’t just believe dumb things; they actively resist further learning rather than let go of those beliefs,” says Nichols. “The issue is not indifference to established knowledge; it’s the emergence of a positive *hostility* to such knowledge. This is new in American culture.”

I’ll leave it to others to decide whether today’s public discourse truly is nuttier than that of previous decades. (Remember the hullabaloo over 1987’s Harmonic Convergence? The 1970s-era debate over a woman’s capacity to run a marathon without her uterus falling out? That time in the 1960s when the John Birch Society decried water fluoridation as a communist plot?) Nichols is hardly alone, though, in sensing that we’ve entered dangerous new terrain, in which fact-based reasoning struggles to compete with Russian propaganda, political gaslighting, and the Pizzagate conspiracy (which, as an aside, really hits home for me — the restaurant where Hillary Clinton is supposed to be hiding child sex slaves is my neighborhood pizza place. They make a great crust).

It’s worth noting that Nichols resists the temptation to blame the public schools for the sorry state we’re in. For example, people who refuse to vaccinate their children tend to be well-educated and should know better. The real problem, he argues, is that “ignorance has become hip, with some Americans wearing their rejection of expert advice as a badge of cultural sophistication.”

Still, though, those of us who work in K-12 education cannot pretend that we have nothing to do with what the historian Richard Hofstadter termed “anti-intellectualism in American life.” As [Johann Neem](#) explains in this month’s *Kappan*, it has been many decades since our policy makers and school system leaders shared a consensus on the merits of providing every child with a liberal education. Even today, after a 30-year push to raise academic standards in English, math, and other subject areas, we aim not to cultivate students’ intellectual curiosity, so much as to make sure they master the skills employers are looking for.

Nor, when we do try to provide a liberal education, can we avoid the anti-intellectualism that bears down on us from outside the classroom. As [Robert Bullough](#), [Glenn Branch](#), and [Emily Knox](#) describe in these pages, teachers’ efforts to provide a rich curriculum are often constrained by top-down management, organized opposition to the teaching of science, and local resistance to having children read “dangerous” books.

At a time when many educators are, like Nichols, deeply concerned about the level of anti-intellectual hostility that has flooded our politics and public life, we thought it would be helpful for this issue of *Kappan* to give some historical perspective on the ways in which our schools have wrestled with these issues. And, as our contributors demonstrate, Hofstadter’s 1963 analysis continues to serve as an important touchstone for contemporary debates about what it means to be an educated American.

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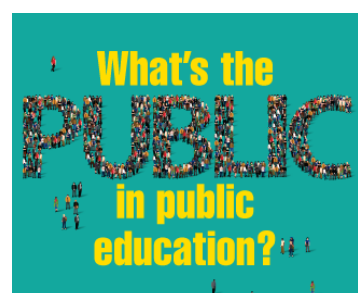
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