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COMMENTARY

Does the Partisan Divide Include the K-12 Curriculum?

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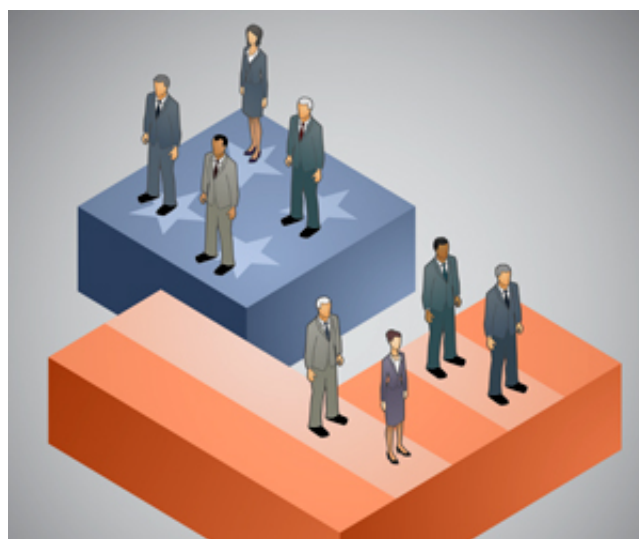
Americans have generally wanted much the same things taught in their public schools. Elementary students should learn three “R’s”—reading, ‘riting and `rithmetic. In high school, it’s time to prepare for college or a career by studying core subjects, such as English, history, algebra, biology, and a foreign language. That basic understanding has not prevented political spats over school spending and school attendance boundaries. But the core operations of schools have usually been left undisturbed.

But partisan debate has increasingly turned the core curriculum into a political football. A highly politicized battle over global warming taking place in Washington is one driver. This past July, Democratic senators proposed an amendment to a new federal education bill, which would have allowed districts to apply for funding to facilitate instruction in climate change. The Republican majority killed the proposal. Said Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander: “Just imagine what the curriculum on climate change would be if we shifted from President Obama to President Cruz and then back to President Sanders and then to President Trump.”

One might dismiss this hoopla as mere inside-the-beltway politics were it not for the fact that climate-change debates are splitting the public along partisan lines, including when it comes to the curriculum. We discovered this as part of our **ninth annual Education Next survey of public opinion**, which was administered to nationally representative cross-sections of approximately 700 teachers and 3,300 other Americans in May and June of this year. Because the survey included a large number of participants, we were able to divide them randomly into two groups. We asked one group, let’s call them “Group A,” to estimate (on a scale from 1 to 7) the emphasis they believe their local schools currently do place on several subjects and topics. The second half, or Group B, was asked to use the same scale to indicate how much emphasis *should be* placed on them.

Since the two groups represent samples of the same population, their responses can be compared. To

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find out the increased emphasis people desire, we subtracted the average score of Group A from Group B. The difference tells us how much additional emphasis people would like to be placed on a particular subject. Since the scale is only seven points, even a difference of half a point is quite large.

Except for athletics, the average scores of Group B, which told us the amount of emphasis a subject or topic “should” receive, is always higher than Group A, which told us the amount of emphasis the subject is thought to be getting currently. In other words, people think teachers should place more emphasis on just about everything. Perhaps it is human nature to say that other people should be doing more.

Still, when it comes to how *much* more emphasis is necessary, opinion divides. On several matters, the thinking of parents differs from that of teachers, as do the opinions of Republicans from Democrats.

The biggest divide is over the issue of global warming. In general, people say the topic deserves substantially more attention in the classroom—about two-thirds of a point *more* emphasis on our seven-point scale. But that increment masks an immense partisan divide. Democrats want the topic to be given one-and-one-half full points more emphasis than they say the schools are currently giving, while Republicans prefer nearly a third of a point *less* emphasis. That is a huge difference along partisan lines.

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Global warming is not the only partisan issue. Even when it comes to reading and math, Democrats and Republicans disagree on the amount of additional focus these subjects should require. When No Child Left Behind was enacted into law by a bipartisan Congress back in 2002, reading and math were the first subjects chosen for testing, presumably because members of Congress—and almost everyone else—believed those to be the most important subjects for children to learn. But in the decade or more since, debates over testing have, strange as it seems, put these basic subjects at partisan risk. On the seven-point scale, Republicans want to put nearly half a point more emphasis on reading and a quarter of a point additional weight on math than Democrats do.

When it comes to the arts, Democrats, compared with Republicans, want to place significantly more emphasis on the topic—more than a third of a point more. Apparently, they agree with President Barack Obama’s first director of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman, **who urged greater emphasis on the arts** (and implicitly criticized math and reading tests) when he said in 2009: “We’re going to try to move forward all the kids who were left behind by No Child Left Behind. ... It’s very often the arts that catches them.”

“The partisan divide seems to have leaked beyond Washington into the school house.”

Republicans would like to see more concentration on history, while Democrats would place more weight on “character education” and a good deal more emphasis on “bullying prevention.”

On key topics, teachers lean in the same direction as Democrats. For example, as compared with parents, teachers want to increase the emphasis on the arts by a full point more, even while favoring significantly less of an increase in the emphasis on reading and math. Also, teachers think global warming deserves nearly a half point more emphasis on the seven-point scale than parents prefer.

Partisan differences should not be exaggerated. Both Republicans and Democrats think less emphasis

should be put on athletics, and about the same additional emphasis should be focused on science. And one must keep in mind that, as we said at the beginning, everyone wants at least some more emphasis on just about everything.

Yet, on such basic questions as the relative importance of reading, math, and the arts, to say nothing of global warming, the partisan divide seems to have leaked beyond Washington into the school house. One worries whether that is a good thing. After all, we used to celebrate the common school, because we thought we pretty much agreed on what it should be doing.



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