

Reality Check

Murray's simple truths not so simple

Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality

By Charles Murray

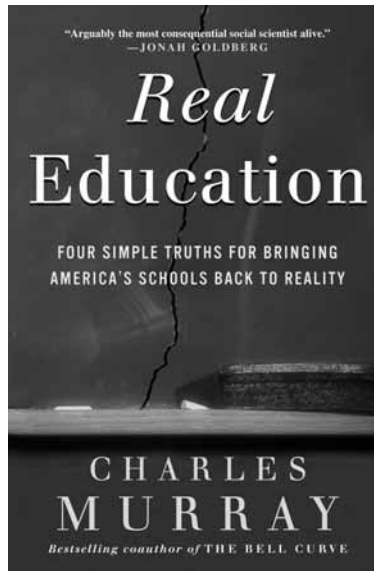
Crown Forum, 2008, \$24.95; 224 pages.

As reviewed by Peter Wehner

Charles Murray is one of the most influential public intellectuals of the last quarter century. His 1984 book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* helped bring about a sea change in how we view welfare programs and paved the way for the 1996 welfare reform legislation, perhaps the most successful social policy reform in modern times. Murray's newest book, *Real Education*, in his words, "calls for a transformation of American education—a transformation not just of means, but of ends." We need, Murray argues, "to redefine educational success."

Real Education consists of five crisply written chapters. The first, "Ability Varies," borrows from Howard Gardner's classification of multiple intelligences. Murray identifies three—spatial, linguistic, and logical-mathematical—that he says constitute "academic ability." Having stated a simple and uncontroversial truth—ability varies and it varies a lot—Murray argues that this has transmuted into an untruth: "that everyone is good at something, and that educators can use that something to make up for other deficits." Murray goes on: "The core abilities that dominate academic success vary together," he argues. "Schools that ignore those realities are doing a disservice to all their students."

In chapter two, "Half of the Children Are Below Average," Murray argues, in intentionally jarring language, that schools have "no choice but to leave



many children behind." (Murray clarifies his statement, saying that even the best schools will inevitably have students who do not perform at grade level.) Children in roughly the bottom third of the distribution of linguistic and logical-mathematical ability are "just not smart enough to succeed on a conventional academic track."

Murray bases his empirical claims on what he calls "three reality tests": The Coleman Report, published in 1966, assessed the effects of inequality of educational opportunity on student achievement. The expectation was that the report would document a relationship between the quality of schools and academic achievement. But, Murray says, "to everyone's shock, the Coleman Report...found that the quality of schools explains almost nothing about differences in academic achievement.... Family background was far and away the most important factor in determining student achievement."

Because he believes that poor children are disproportionately below average in academic ability, Murray's

second test is Title I, a popular federal program whose goal is to upgrade the schools attended by children from low-income families. Evaluations of Title I have, according to Murray, shown no significant positive impact on student achievement.

The third test is No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the education reform law passed in 2002 whose goals include improving the performance of students in the lower half of the academic ability distribution. Murray argues NCLB will continue to fail in its effort to bring all the nation's children to "proficiency," however that is defined. All past efforts to raise the academic achievement of low-ability students, according to Murray, have failed, and so has NCLB.

Murray's third chapter, "Too Many People Are Going to College," argues that colleges are becoming obsolete, in part because of the Internet; that the provision of a liberal education should be done by elementary and secondary schools; and that "by making a college degree something that everyone is supposed to want, we are punishing the majority of young people who do not get one." According to Murray, bachelor's degrees have wrongly become a "symbol of first-class citizenship" and "[t]oday's college system is implicated in the emergence of class-riven America."

In chapter four, "America's Future Depends on How We Educate the Academically Gifted," Murray anticipates likely criticisms: "The proposition is not that America's future *should* depend on an elite that is educated to run the country, but that, whether we like it or not, America's future *does* depend on an elite that runs the country" [emphasis in the original]. He admits the idea is "instinctively unattractive." Given where we are, however, we need to train our

elite to be better citizens. Murray spends most of the chapter dilating on what that means: rigor in verbal expression, forming judgments, thinking about virtue and the good, and developing empathy and greater humility.

Murray concludes with sound prescriptions for improving education, including obtaining a first-rate assessment of every child entering elementary school, providing a safe and orderly classroom, teaching a core curriculum, allowing gifted students to go as fast as they can, doing a better job at teaching those who are workbound after high school how to make a living, expanding school choice, and using certifications (similar to CPA exams) to undermine the BA.

Real Education is provocative and powerfully argued and, like Murray himself, intellectually impressive and fair-minded. Murray is right in saying that students have varying abilities and when educators don't take those differences into account, children suffer. He's right in insisting that we're not paying enough attention to academically high-achieving students. And he's right that the goal to make all American students "proficient" in reading and math is simply unachievable, if the notion of proficiency is to retain any useful meaning.

Where Murray is wrong, in my estimation, is in his scorn for No Child Left Behind. David Brooks of the *New York Times* has pointed out that NCLB "has ushered in a data revolution, and hard data is the prerequisite for change." And Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute report that "NCLB and state-level efforts to impose standards and accountability on the schools are plainly boosting the kids who need it most—surely a good thing." A new, 50-state

report by the Center on Education Policy found that reading and math scores are rising and achievement gaps are narrowing, gains that are attributable in part to NCLB.

But where I dissent most from Murray is in his assuming that students of

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low academic ability are achieving pretty much all they are capable of and that better schools, better teachers, and the right policies would make at best only a marginal difference when it comes to improving their achievement in reading and math. His conclusions run counter to what I have witnessed over the years. When I worked for then Secretary of Education William Bennett, he made a point of traveling to successful schools throughout America to highlight what works. In city after city, we saw outstanding schools and educators like East L.A.'s Jaime Escalante significantly improve the academic achievement of what were thought to be low-ability students.

Nor does Murray sufficiently explain documented success stories like the KIPP schools, a national network of free, open-enrollment charter schools serving more than 14,000 students, mostly low income and initially poorly performing. KIPP schools couple high expectations with a longer school day and no-nonsense instruction. The results are impressive: the average student who has been with KIPP for four years starts 5th grade at the 40th percentile in mathematics and the 32nd percentile in reading; after four years, these same students are performing at the 82nd percentile in mathematics and the 60th percentile in reading.

There are examples all across America of schools and educators who are similarly making impressive academic strides with students of more-limited academic abilities. These successes demonstrate that while there are certainly boundaries to what some can achieve academically, we can do much better. There remains an enormous gap between what all of our students are currently learning and what they are capable of learning. And playing off a line from Finn, it's not obvious to me that American students are so much farther down the intelligence scale than their agemates in other lands.

To his credit, Murray is wholly uninterested in tinkering at the margins of policy debates. His goal is far more ambitious: to challenge key assumptions and fundamentally alter how we think about things. *Real Education* does that, and those who care about education and children should take Murray's arguments seriously.

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