

The Burden of Bad Ideas

On the damage done to America's schools by social justice delusions

The Lost Decade: Returning to the Fight for Better Schools in America

by Steven F. Wilson

Pioneer Institute, 2025, \$27.95; 380 pages.

As reviewed by Helen Baxendale

IN JUNE 2019, Steven Wilson, then CEO of the high-performing Brooklyn charter school network Ascend, wrote a blog post entitled “The promise of intellectual joy.” After making the case for universal, challenging, liberal arts education, Wilson worried that “as schools strive to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive . . . there is the growing risk that these imperatives will be shamefully exploited to justify reduced intellectual expectations of students.”

Exhibit A: a document then in wide circulation, including in training workshops for all New York City public school administrators and principals, cataloguing 13 “damaging characteristics of white supremacy culture,” such as “objectivity,” “a sense of urgency,” and “worship of the written word.” “How tragic it would be,” wrote Wilson, “if any child was taught that a reverence for the written word was a *white* characteristic.” For raising the entirely reasonable concern that race essentialism might diminish the academic expectations and achievements of non-white students, Wilson was dismissed from the charter network he’d founded and led since 2007.

Wilson’s reflections in *The Lost Decade* bring to mind an earlier work, *The Great Terror* by the late Sovietologist, Robert Conquest. Conquest’s 1968 opus catalogued the horrors of the Soviet Union when many in the West still refused to concede the scale of Stalin’s purges. After the opening of the Russian archives corroborated Conquest’s account, his publisher requested a revised edition with a new title. Conquest proffered “*I Told You So, You F***** Fools.*”

To Wilson’s credit, there is no score-settling nor rancor in his book, but there is more than a little vindication. *The Lost Decade* is a tale told more in sorrow than in anger, and it is all the more devastating for its detached accounting of the indelible and avoidable damage wrought by the ideological excesses of recent years.

Taking up the thread of his ill-fated blog post, Wilson’s book begins with a brief history of American schooling, showing that today’s social justice education movement is “not the long-awaited correction to America’s procession of exclusionary,

anti-intellectual school reforms. It is its apotheosis.” That tradition began in the late 19th century, with the winnowing—via dubious psychometric testing—of the “educable” from the masses, and continued into the mid-20th century with the “life adjustment” education movement, whereby lessons in personal hygiene and physical fitness supplanted literature and physics for the non-college bound majority.

The same notion was reborn in the 1970s with the advent of the “shopping mall high school.” This time around, students weren’t sorted; they *self*-selected into academically denuded courses and tracks. But the result was the same: Racial and economic inequalities were perpetuated for want of a real education. Today, anti-intellectualism manifests in the social justice nostrums that objective truth is a chimera, the very notion of a

canon is “problematic,” and children cannot possibly be expected to appreciate works that don’t reflect their identities or uphold contemporary norms. Across the decades, the animating idea is the same: that it is impractical, unrealistic, cruel—racist, even—to offer *all students* a rich liberal arts education.

Of course, there have been notable exceptions to the anti-intellectual and exclusionary strain Wilson identifies, and his book explores two: Massachusetts’s rise to the top of the NAEP rankings through the adoption of ambitious, knowledge-based state standards and accompanying assessments, and the advent of “achievement gap-busting,” “no excuses” urban charter schools. In both cases, however, hard-won gains have been overwhelmed in recent

times by a surge of unseriousness.

Around the middle of last decade, just as it was starting to amass irrefutable evidence of its efficacy and scalability, and as legitimate criticisms of Gradgrindian instruction and draconian discipline were being addressed, the “no excuses” charter movement—highly structured lessons, strict behavior codes, earnest young teachers with Stakhanovite work ethics obsessing over the closing of achievement gaps—were increasingly viewed as manifestations of oppression and “white-centeredness.” Then George Floyd’s murder and the ravages of protracted school closures kicked things into overdrive.

Wilson’s richly sourced case studies recount how the indiscriminate embrace of social justice shibboleths wreaked havoc in urban charter schools



Steven F. Wilson

as well as in the broader K–12 system. Teachers were encouraged to moonlight as therapists and to lean into their activist proclivities. “Trauma informed” critical pedagogy supplanted intellectual formation and academic achievement. School cultures collapsed as the “anti-racist” sensibilities of teachers and administrators overwhelmed the rights of students to safe and orderly classrooms.

The urban charter movement was especially susceptible to DEI excesses, notes Wilson, because its teaching ranks draw so heavily from recent college graduates. Consequently, the rigid identitarianism of the campus has been transplanted wholesale into erstwhile “no excuses” networks, destroying the *esprit de corps* essential to “gap busting” work and driving out many veteran leaders. As Michael Goldstein, founder of Boston’s Match Charter Public School, told Wilson: “[O]nce the battle shifts to all these 23-year-olds calling you a racist and basically trying to yell at you, it’s a stupid job. . . . Why would anybody want it?”

The predictable and depressing result of this ideological conflagration is academic malaise. As Wilson (among others) reports, charter networks in New York City, Boston, and Chicago that once prided themselves on outstanding test scores have recorded more precipitous post-pandemic proficiency drops than their district counterparts.

Happily, there are urban charter networks that deftly navigated the DEI-maelstrom of the past decade. As Wilson notes, “many charter networks in the South” and in “red and purple states” “remain committed to a rigorous academic education.”

***The Lost Decade* is a tale told more in sorrow than in anger, and it is all the more devastating for its detached accounting of the indelible and avoidable damage wrought by the ideological excesses of recent years.**

Even in the Northeast, where, according to Wilson, “social justice education is far more prevalent,” some withstood the rushing tide. When KIPP jettisoned its “Work Hard, Be Nice” mantra because it “place[d] value on being compliant and submissive” and “support[ed] the illusion of meritocracy,” Eva Moskowitz’s Success Academies vowed to “maintain all school policies and practices that support a child’s right to learn and a teacher’s right to teach” because “our students deserve the same well-rounded education that affluent white children have long received.” On the 2024 New York state tests, 82 percent of Success Academy students were ELA proficient, with 95 percent demonstrating proficiency in math. The corresponding figures for NYC district school students were 49 percent and 53 percent, respectively. The



Students from South Bronx Community Charter High School join community leaders in the Future of the City March against police brutality in December 2017.

ALAMY STOCK IMAGE

smaller Classical Charter Schools network, which serves students of the South Bronx via “a rigorous curriculum” and a “structured, supportive environment,” posted even more impressive results. In both cases, network leaders hewed to their mission of academic excellence and refused to be diverted into ideological cul-de-sacs.

The first step in treating any pathology is to identify the problem. Steven Wilson has delivered a brave and exacting diagnosis. His chapter-length evisceration of the “five evasions” that deform contemporary American schooling—the therapeutic, instrumental, technological, futuristic, and political—should be mandated reading for trainee teachers and grant officers.

As for prescriptions, *The Lost Decade* closes with a rousing call to “prepare students for the world as it is, not for a lost utopia where competence, merit, and competition have no purchase.” Education must be oriented toward the “shared pursuit of truth. Truth, students will learn, is not contingent on identity. To stop seeking it out is a kind of intellectual decadence . . . discerning the truth, even when it is contested, is an obligation.” Thus, all students—not just the children of the privileged—must benefit from an ambitious liberal arts curriculum, delivered via excellent instruction, in schools characterized by order and joy.

It’s an inspiring vision, but one can’t help but quail at the degree of difficulty, given our current despond. Lamentably few in the charter world came to Wilson’s defense in 2019 when he was ousted for advancing just such a vision. Here’s hoping that Wilson’s words are more widely heeded this time around. The life chances of millions might turn on it.

Helen Baxendale is a writer and education researcher from Phoenix.