

The Phoenix Declaration: An American Vision for Education

In this time of moral and political crises, when too many schools have lost their way, it is the responsibility of America's parents, educators, and policymakers to recommit ourselves to the central purposes of education.

Education is the cornerstone of individual opportunity, family flourishing, and national prosperity. Every child should have access to a high-quality, content-rich education that fosters the pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful, so that they may achieve their full, God-given potential. America's schools must work alongside parents to prepare children for the responsibilities of adulthood, including their familial and civic responsibilities, by cultivating excellence in mind and heart.

America's system of self-government is predicated upon an informed and virtuous citizenry. To protect their rights and freedoms, and to fulfill their civic duties, citizens must first know what they are and what America stands for. In the words of Thomas Jefferson: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Information without moral formation is insufficient. Parents, schools, and religious and civic institutions must cultivate in children the personal and civic virtues necessary for self-government. "Public virtue cannot exist in a nation without private [virtue]," observed John Adams, "and public virtue is the only foundation of republics."

Schools should equip students with the knowledge, character, and skills necessary to succeed in life as individuals and to fulfill their obligations as members of their families, local communities, and country. In order to empower families, advance educational excellence, transmit our culture, and uphold the foundational principles of our constitutional republic, we believe the following principles should guide American families, schools, and policymakers:

Parental Choice and Responsibility

Parents are the primary educators of their children. Parents should have the freedom to choose the learning environments that align with their values and best meet their children's individual learning needs, with public education funding following the child. Policies should respect the right and high duty of parents to raise their children and make decisions about their children's education.

Transparency and Accountability

Schools, as secondary educators, should work with parents, not attempt to serve as replacements for them. Schools have a responsibility to be transparent with parents about what their children are being taught and how their children are performing. Schools must never have misguided policies that hide information from parents about their children's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The highest form of accountability is when schools are answerable directly to well-informed parents.

Truth and Goodness

Education must be grounded in truth. Students should learn that there is objective truth and that it is knowable. Science courses must be grounded in reality, not ideological fads. Students should learn that good and evil exist, and that human beings have the capacity and duty to choose good.

Cultural Transmission

A central purpose of education is to transmit humanity's accumulated knowledge and wisdom, as well as our nation's particular culture and heritage, to the next generation. A civilization survives only if it intentionally transmits its history, traditions, and values—including its yet unrealized aspirations—to the next generation. True progress comes only by building on what has been learned and achieved in the past. Students should therefore learn about America's founding principles and roots in the broader Western and Judeo-Christian traditions. Students should study the best that has been thought and said, engaging in the great conversation among the competing viewpoints that comprise our intellectual heritage, so that they freely make the best views their own.

Character Formation

Education must prepare children for the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. That endeavor entails much more than merely preparing students for a career. A proper education is focused on the full formation of a child, particularly the child's character. Education should cultivate the virtues and discipline necessary for self-governance. Students must be held accountable for their behavior, both to learn that their choices have consequences and to maintain the order necessary for learning to proceed.

Academic Excellence

Schools should foster academic excellence. Schools should prioritize a rigorous and content-rich curriculum rooted in foundational subjects such as math, literature, science, history, civics, and the arts. Emphasis should be placed on core knowledge and tried-and-true pedagogy rather than fads or experimental teaching methods. Students should be challenged and rewarded for hard work and accomplishment. Schools should help students achieve their full potential, going as far and as fast as their talents will take them.

Citizenship

A republic depends upon an educated and patriotic citizenry. Schools should teach students the civic virtues and civic knowledge necessary for self-government and the task of building a more perfect union, including the value of civil disagreement. Schools should also foster a healthy sense of patriotism and cultivate gratitude for and attachment to our country and all who serve its central institutions. Our shared civic rituals, such as the Pledge of Allegiance and national anthem, should be respected and revived. Students should develop a deep understanding of and respect for our nation's founding documents and the ideas they contain about ordered liberty, justice, the rule of law, limited government, natural rights, and the equal dignity of all human beings. Students should learn the whole truth about America—its merits and failings—without obscuring that America is a great source of good in the world and that we have a tradition that is worth passing on.