



Sutherland Institute's Education Vision: Respecting the Pupil

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Reform requires vision. Leaders who want to transform education must know where they want to go and why they want to go there. They spread their vision by elevating public dialogue to the level of values, principles and ideals – the “attainment of the highest things.” They avoid the temptation to only oppose bad ideas without offering bold new ones, recognizing that without the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the Boston Tea Party would not have been even a footnote in history. To this end, Sutherland Institute offers its vision for education: how we view human learning, what we believe to be the purpose of education, and what education should look like once it is transformed.

Our Nature

Human beings are magnificent. By our very nature we ask, wonder, reason, reflect and change. In short, we are created to learn. We witness this innate propensity to learn when a baby imitates her parents. We see it when a young child achieves fluency in a complex language by age 5. We see it in adults as they continue to ask questions throughout life. As Aristotle put it, “All men by nature desire to know.”

Not surprisingly, great thinkers have long philosophized about the best way to educate a person. Years of philosophy debates and political battles have culminated in America's answer: our K-12 education system.

Our K-12 “education system” – referring in part to public schools and in part to policy affecting other forms of education – is a broad but loaded term with more than a few negative connotations. Americans hear complaints about excessive testing, one-size-fits-all classrooms, lack of alternative options, wearied teachers leaving the profession after only a few years on the job, inequities in access to quality schools, low scores on national and international tests, and heavy-handed federal initiatives.

At the core of these complaints is one ultimate question: Is our education system designed to encourage the learning of children, each of whom has unique interests and learning needs? It may be

telling that enthusiastic education reformers exist on both the right and the left sides of the political spectrum. Americans know that transforming education is not simply a political spat, but a moral obligation.

If we are created to learn, then we should not sit by if the institutions and systems intended to provide education create barriers to learning. Sutherland Institute believes we can transform education.

Our Vision

Sutherland Institute's education vision rests on two main ideas: (1) education requires that we meet the unique needs of the child; and (2) parents, students and taxpayers should be empowered as the owners of the education system to create a learning path as unique as the student. Both of these ideas demand that authority over policy decision-making be as close to the student as reasonably possible.

What this means is that we must create a policy environment that respects diversity in how children learn; recognizes parents as decision-makers; reinforces the proper role of state, local, district and school leaders; invites education entrepreneurs to create public and private academic options; empowers teachers and administrators with the resources they

need to meet unique student needs; and expects those teachers and administrators to produce exceptional learning outcomes. Our idea is perhaps best captured by the term “educational choice.”

In practice, this vision requires a vibrant education market that offers a wealth of choices in schools, programs, services and therapies. It also requires parents and students to be equipped with accurate information about their options, and policy mechanisms that allow families to choose an educational path that meets a student’s needs. Finally, it requires a delegation of policy authority among school, district and state decision-makers in a way that each can make the policy decisions that are best suited to them.

Our vision does not call for the destruction of public education, but its transformation. Providing for the learning of all children is a noble goal. As Noam Chomsky said, “A public education system is based on the principle that you care whether the kid down the street gets an education.” Indeed, but what type of education? We should care that every kid down every street has the opportunity to learn in a way that unlocks his or her innate and specific potential. Anything less would be a disservice.

Thus, it’s not publicly funded education that should be rejected but methods that standardize children, even if unintentionally. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do ... he only holds the key to his own secret.” Respecting the pupil is our vision. When students have access to the best options that the public or private sphere can offer, our system of education comes closest to this ideal.

Achieving a transformative vision requires from everyone the best creative, intellectual, and interpersonal efforts. As Sutherland founder Gaylord Swim said, “This process requires strong advocates, certainly, but it also takes a counter-balancing sense of humility, civility, and dialogue ... the political course often leads to power struggles, pride, vanity and egocentric ambition, ending in acrimony. It all too often manifests itself in strident voices, character assassinations, protest demonstrations, cloakrooms deals, and corruption.” To create the space for

Emerson’s call to respect the pupil, we must strive for open conversation and elevated dialogue, the seedbed for great ideas.

Conclusion

All human beings are created with the ability to learn, the desire to grow, the potential to improve, a unique set of strengths and weaknesses, and a purpose to accomplish extraordinary things. Sutherland Institute believes education ought to reflect these truths. And we believe it can.

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