**Topic 4: Education**

**Documents to help you explore the issue of the challenges and the future of education in the 21st century**

**1. Alpha school, Texas (video 2025)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmix-IUSAN0

**2. Handsworth Grammar School (video 2016)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwpT\_cNNTOU

# 3. Anti-Intellectualism in America

There has been a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in America, unlike most other Western countries says Richard Hofstadter, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964 for his book, [*Anti-Intellectualism In American Life*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Eamazon%2Ecom%2FAnti-Intellectualism-American-Life-Richard-Hofstadter%2Fdp%2F0394703170&urlhash=V5kF&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block)*.* Hofstadter traces the roots of anti-intellectualism to the evangelical Protestantism of America’s first European settlers and later its influence on the American Dream, the belief that an ordinary man, even without an education, can become rich and successful. Since the eighteenth century, as evangelicalism emerged in contrast to the Catholic Church and Church of England, anti-education rhetoric became a common response in evangelical settings. ‘I do not read any book,’ said influential evangelist preacher Dwight Moody, ‘unless it will help me to understand [the Bible].' America’s “Founding Fathers,” such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington espoused masculine ideals of the “self-made” uneducated man: a type of rugged entrepreneur who came to America with nothing, but through hard work, tenacity, and a little luck, could become a successful and wealthy. He did not need an education to succeed," according to Emily Casanova, writing in [*Science Over A Cuppa.*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fscienceoveracuppa%2Ecom%2F2016%2F01%2F10%2Fthe-roots-of-american-anti-intellectualism%2F&urlhash=v9RC&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block) In contrast, enlightened intellectuals were characterized as effeminate and ineffectual.

Over the course of the next 200 years in America, Evangelical Protestantism supported anti-intellectualism and anti-science. In 2015, the [Pew Research Center](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Epewresearch%2Eorg%2Fscience%2F2015%2F10%2F22%2Fstrong-role-of-religion-in-views-about-evolution-and-perceptions-of-scientific-consensus%2F&urlhash=1XQ6&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block) found that nearly a quarter of Americans belong to white evangelical churches and 42% of Protestants are creationists who rejected scientific facts about the origins of the earth and humanity.

H. Sidkey, writing in the [*Skeptical Inquirer,*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Eresearchgate%2Enet%2Fpublication%2F324546540_The_War_on_Science_Anti-Intellectualism_and_Alternative_Ways_of_Knowing_in_21st_Century_America&urlhash=n5cW&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block) argues that we "live in a scary and confusing ‘post-truth’ era of disinformation, ‘fake news’ ‘counter-knowledge,’ ‘weaponized lies, ‘conspiracy theories and irrationalism.” He goes on to say “Bogus and irrational ideas are thriving and seem to be widely received and accepted.” Mark Bauerlein, in his book*,*[*The Dumbest Generation*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Eamazon%2Ecom%2FDumbest-Generation-Stupefies-Americans-Jeopardizes%2Fdp%2F1585427128&urlhash=M7SR&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block) , describes, as he sees it, “ how a whole generation of youth is being dumbed down by their aversion to reading anything of substance" and their addiction to what he calls digital "crap"  on social media.

Anti-intellectualism is commonly expressed as the deprecation of education and philosophy, and the dismissal of art, literature and science as impractical and a waste of time and energy. Anti-intellectuals see themselves as “champions of the common folk”—populists against political and academic elitism, says Matt Motta, in the journal [*American Politics Research*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fjournals%2Esagepub%2Ecom%2Fdoi%2Ffull%2F10%2E1177%2F1532673X17719507&urlhash=wWRg&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block) *.*

Tom Nichols is professor at the U.S. Naval War College and author of [*The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*](https://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Eamazon%2Ecom%2FDeath-Expertise-Campaign-Established-Knowledge%2Fdp%2F0190469412&urlhash=Fe9A&trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block). He argues that “A significant number of people now believe, for no reason but self-affirmation, that they know better than experts in almost every field. They have come to this conclusion after being coddled in classrooms from kindergarten through college, continually assured by infotainment personalities that popular views, no matter how nutty, are virtuous and right, and mesmerized by an internet that tells them exactly what they want to hear, no matter how ridiculous the question.” The theme that anybody’s opinion is as good as anybody else’s opinion (regardless of their expertise) runs deep in the American fabric.

Adapted from Ray Williams, www.linkedin.com, June, 2024.

**4. PISA founder Andreas Schleicher on the future of the education ranking**

The global education ranking system, the Program for International Student Assessment, or [PISA](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/), is changing to put more emphasis on measuring 21st-century skills, such as creativity and digital literacy and to offer countries more analysis, PISA’s founder Andreas Schleicher said.

Schleicher, who is head of education at the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](https://www.devex.com/organizations/organization-for-economic-co-operation-and-development-oecd-29872) (OECD), which runs PISA, said the ranking has already changed a great deal since it was first launched in 2000, but that it continues to evolve.

“As the world is changing, PISA evolves … we are less concerned about reflecting what schools currently do, we are more concerned with what kinds of cognitive, socioemotional skills do young people require to be successful tomorrow,” he told Devex during the recent [Global Education & Skills Forum](https://www.educationandskillsforum.org/) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

When PISA first started assessing groups of 15-year-olds from a sample of schools across different countries, its sole members were the world’s wealthiest nations, many of whom were initially reluctant to join, Schleicher said.

However, since then, PISA’s membership has expanded and now includes [more than 40 non-OECD](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisa-2018-participants.htm) member countries. India recently [rejoined after a 10 year absence](https://www.devex.com/news/india-s-re-entry-to-pisa-triggers-mixed-response-94286).

“The reason more and more countries are interested is to take part in this global conversation that PISA has created about what we should be teaching and how we can teach it best,” he said, adding that, “education solutions have no borders, they are not domestic in nature.”

In recent years, the test has also grown to measure a broader set of skills and competencies beyond the standard literacy, numeracy, and science indicators.

The PISA test, which takes place every three years, now measures collaborative problem-solving and global competence, and in 2021, it will start measuring creative thinking, Schleicher said. The PISA team is also developing a way of testing students’ digital learning, which should be ready in time for the 2024 assessment, he added.

“You can become the slave of the algorithm that tells you what to do and think, but technology can also be a great enabler of human skills, and so we want to … look into the kind of cognitive … resources that help us leverage technology,” the PISA boss explained.

These shifts reflect the need for major reform within most education systems worldwide, which currently teach out-of-date information using old-fashioned methods such as rote memorization, Schleicher told Devex.

“Trigonometry was useful 400 years ago for measuring fields … It’s a relic of a long-gone past … We say it’s important without questioning it ... We should have a much closer look at what students learn today,” he said.

But education is a notoriously “conservative social enterprise,” he said, and school leaders, teachers, and parents can be resistant to change.

“When I talk to people working on curriculum design, it’s about protecting the status quo,” he said, adding that the opinions of students are what is really valuable: “The students of today have very good sense of what’s important for them and how they learn.”

“At the moment, PISA tells us about the effectiveness of school systems, but I do believe it’s important to give schools a better source of feedback,” he said.

The global PISA test samples a selection of schools to come up with a national score, but individual schools can also [pay to take an individual PISA assessment](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-for-schools/). Schleicher said PISA for schools can help staff improve learning outcomes by providing evidence-based analysis of students’ performance and data on the challenges facing poor performers.

The scheme also offers peer-learning opportunities with other schools and teachers. Schleicher said he hopes to one day be able to offer this service for free.

Sophie Edwards, www.devex.com, April, 2019.

**5. How the Ivy League Broke America: The meritocracy isn’t working. We need something new.**

Every coherent society has a social ideal—an image of what the superior person looks like. In America, from the late 19th century until sometime in the 1950s, the superior person was the Well-Bred Man. Such a man was born into one of the old WASP families that dominated the elite social circles on Fifth Avenue, in New York City; the Main Line, outside Philadelphia; Beacon Hill, in Boston. He was molded at a prep school like Groton or Choate, and came of age at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. In those days, you didn’t have to be brilliant or hardworking to get into Harvard, but it really helped if you were “clubbable”—good-looking, athletic, graceful, casually elegant, Episcopalian, and white. It really helped, too, if your dad had gone there. People living according to this social ideal valued not academic accomplishment but refined manners, prudent judgment, and the habit of command. This was the age of social privilege.

And then a small group of college administrators decided to blow it all up. The most important of them was James Conant, the president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953. American capitalism, [he argued](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780618773558), was turning into a society in which a few ultrarich families had too much corporate power. So Conant and others set out to shift to criteria centered on brainpower. The common idea of the era was that intelligence, the highest human trait, can be measured by standardized tests and the ability to do well in school from ages 15 to 18. Universities should serve as society’s primary sorting system, segregating the smart from the not smart. Intelligence is randomly distributed across the population, so rich families won’t be able to buy their kids higher grades.

When universities like Harvard, Yale and Princeton shifted their definition of ability, large segments of society adjusted to meet that definition. Status markers changed. In 1967, [the sociologist Daniel Bell noted](https://www.nationalaffairs.com/storage/app/uploads/public/58e/1a4/a2b/58e1a4a2b88ce619080580.pdf) that the leadership in the emerging social order was coming from “the intellectual institutions.” “Social prestige and social status,” he predicted, “will be rooted in the intellectual and scientific communities.” Family life changed as parents tried to produce the sort of children who could get into selective colleges. College-educated parents practice “concerted cultivation,” driving their kids from one supervised skill-building, résumé-enhancing activity to another. Elementary and middle school students spent more of their day enduring standardized tests and Advanced Placement classes.

America’s opportunity structure changed as well. It’s gotten harder to secure a good job if you lack a college degree, especially an elite college degree. When I started in journalism, in the 1980s, older working-class reporters still roamed the newsroom. Today, journalism is a profession reserved almost exclusively for college grads, especially elite ones. “The people who manage to squeeze through the stem of a few prestigious colleges and universities,” the writer Michael Lind writes, “can then fill leadership positions in almost every vocation.”

Conant’s reforms should have led to an American golden age. The old WASP aristocracy had been dethroned. A more just society was being built. Some of the fruits of this revolution *are*pretty great. Over the past 50 years, the American leadership class has grown smarter and more diverse. And yet it's not obvious that we have produced either a better leadership class or a healthier relationship between our society and its elites. Generations of young geniuses were given the best education in the history of the world, and then decided to take their talents to finance and consulting. Would we necessarily say that government, civic life, the media, or high finance work better now than in the mid-20th century?

All of us are trapped in this vast sorting system. Teachers can’t teach what they love, because the system is built around teaching to standardized tests. Students can’t focus on the academic subjects they’re passionate about, because the gods of the grade point average demand that they get straight A’s.

The issues of the meritocracy have become pretty obvious:

**1. This system overrates intelligence**: Conant's sorting mechanism was based primarily on intelligence, a quality that can ostensibly be measured by IQ tests or other standardized metrics. But intelligence is less important than Conant and his peers believed. Two people with identical IQ scores can vary widely in their life outcomes. The bottom line is that if you give somebody a standardized test when they are 13 or 18, you will learn something important about them, but not necessarily whether they will flourish in life, nor necessarily whether they will contribute usefully to society’s greater good. Intelligence is not the same as effectiveness. In fact, [one thing that high-IQ people might genuinely be better at than other people](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780393541465) is convincing themselves that their own false views are true.

**2. Success in school is not the same thing as success in life.**Success in school is about jumping through the hoops that adults put in front of you; success in life can involve charting your own course. In school, a lot of success is individual: *How do I stand out?*In life, most success is team-based: How can we work together? Grades reveal who is persistent, self-disciplined, and compliant—but they don’t reveal much about emotional intelligence, relationship skills, passion, leadership ability, creativity, or courage. [The University of Pennsylvania organizational psychologist Adam Grant has written](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/college-gpa-career-success.html): “Academic excellence is not a strong predictor of career excellence. Across work sectors, research shows that the correlation between grades and job performance is modest in the first year after college and trivial within a handful of years.” For that reason, Google and other companies [no longer look at the grade point average of job applicants](https://www.naceweb.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023/publication/research-report/2024-nace-job-outlook.pdf). [Researchers found](https://hbr.org/2020/09/graduates-of-elite-universities-get-paid-more-do-they-perform-better) that students from higher-ranking colleges and universities, while nominally more effective than other students, were more likely to pay “insufficient attention to interpersonal relationships,” and in some instances to be “less friendly,” “more prone to conflict,” and “less likely to identify with their team.” In other words, more likely to be a jerk.

Also, we have now, for better or worse, entered the Age of Artificial Intelligence. AI is already good at regurgitating information from a lecture. AI is already good at standardized tests. [AI can already write papers that would get A’s](https://www.slowboring.com/p/chatgpt-goes-to-harvard) at Harvard. If you’re hiring the students who are good at those things, you’re hiring people whose talents might soon be obsolete.

**3. The meritocracy has created a highly unequal American caste system.** The average high school graduate will earn about $1million less over their [lifetime](https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/collegepayoff-completed.pdf) than the average four-year-college graduate. The average person without a four-year college degree [lives about eight years less](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Case-Deaton-session_16820-BPEA-FA23_WEB.pdf) than the average four-year-college grad. Thirty-five percent of high-school graduates [are obese](https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data-and-statistics/adult-obesity-prevalence-maps.html), compared with 27 percent of four-year-college grads.

Wherever the Information Age economy brings money and power to educated urban elites, populist leaders have risen to rally the less educated: not just Donald Trump in America but Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. These leaders understand that working-class people resent the know-it-all professional class, with their fancy degrees, more than they do billionaire real-estate magnates or rich entrepreneurs. Populist leaders worldwide spread crude exaggerations, gross generalizations, and bald-faced lies, all aimed at telling the educated class, in effect: *Screw you!*

But although the current system may overvalue IQ, we do still need to find and train the people best equipped to be nuclear physicists and medical researchers. The challenge is not to end the meritocracy; it’s to humanize and improve it. “Noncognitive” skills can be more important than cognitive ones. Having a fast mental processor upstairs is great, but other traits may do more to determine how much you are going to contribute to society: Do you try hard? Can you build relationships? Are you curious? Are you trustworthy? How do you perform under pressure?

For instance, the organizational-leadership expert Mark Murphy studied why people get fired. In [*Hiring for Attitude*](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9781259860904), he reports that only 11 percent of the people who were fired from their job or got a bad performance review—were so because of insufficient technical competence. For the other 89 percent, the failures were due to social or moral traits that affected their job performance—bad temperament, uncoachability, low motivation, selfishness. They failed because they lacked the right noncognitive skills. Notions like smartness and intelligence are almost like nonsense and that what matters more for civilizational progress is “educability,” the ability to learn from experience and grow all the days in your life.

If I were given the keys to the meritocracy, I’d redefine merit around the following crucial qualities:

**Curiosity:** If a student asks a question because they are curious about something, they threaten to take the class off course. Teachers learn to ignore such questions so the class can stay on task. In short, our current meritocracy discourages inquiry in favor of simply learning content with the goal of improving test scores. And when children have lost their curiosity by age 11, they tend to remain incurious for the rest of their life.

**Social intelligence:** Sometimes talent lies in the team, not the individual. In an effective meritocracy, we’d want to find people who are fantastic team builders, who have excellent communication and social skills. Coaches sometimes talk about certain athletes as “glue guys,” players who have that ability to make a team greater than the sum of its parts.

**Agility.** In chaotic situations, raw brainpower can be less important than sensitivity of perception. Possessing agility helps you make good judgments in real time.

If we can orient our meritocracy around a definition of human ability that takes more account of traits like motivation, generosity, sensitivity, and passion, then our schools, families, and workplaces will readjust in fundamental ways. After all, what’s really at the core of a person? Is your IQ the most important thing about you? No. I would submit that it’s your desires—what you are interested in, what you love. We want a meritocracy that will help each person identify, nurture, and pursue the ruling passion of their soul.

David Brooks, *The Atlantic*, November, 2024.

**Writing**

- What challenges do you think the French education system faces in the 21st century?

- What should high schools look like today?

**Corrigé (sur Chamilo (PTSI)/Cahier de prépa (PCSI)) à travailler**