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Education Leaders Urge Focus on Knowledge-based Curriculum, Warn Against so-called 21st-Century Skills

Pioneer Institute releases transcript of education policy lessons from Tom Birmingham and E.D. Hirsch

BOSTON, MA — Education policy makers should increasingly focus pre-K-3 instruction on imparting language and crucial background knowledge, said national education expert E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in an address at Northeastern University.

Professor Hirsch offered the recommendations during a recent guest lecture to an education policy class taught by former Massachusetts Senate President Thomas Birmingham. A transcript of the lecture, [Lessons for Education Policy Makers](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/110429_lessons_edu_policy_transcript.pdf) was released today by [Pioneer Institute](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org) (http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/110429_lessons_edu_policy_transcript.pdf).

The transcript includes introductory remarks by President Birmingham, chief architect of the Commonwealth's landmark 1993 education reform law (MERA). The law increased education funding for cities and towns in exchange for high-quality state curriculum frameworks and rigorous student and teacher assessments.

In 2005, 2007, and 2009, Massachusetts students ranked number one in the country on national standardized tests. In 2008, Trends in International Math and Science Study results showed that Massachusetts students were competitive with their peers from Japan, Korea, and Singapore. The Bay State's eighth graders tied for first in the world in science.

“Massachusetts’ national leadership in education was built on its laser-like focus on setting high *academic* goals and enforcing accountability through testing,” says Jim Stergios, Pioneer’s executive director. “We move to a retrograde focus on workforce development at our state’s and our children’s peril.”

In his introduction, Birmingham advocated for liberal arts-based education as a way to bridge race- and class-based achievement gaps and warned against diluting K-12 education with softer, less academic "how-to" skills. “Professor Hirsch has convincingly demonstrated that American public education was beginning to lose its way by the middle of the 20th century,” said Birmingham. “The idea of liberal arts education preparing young people for engaged citizenship gave way to a narrower conception that focused more on short-term economic needs and workforce development.”

Professor Hirsch expressed concern about the recent dominance of what he termed “anti-curriculum ideology,” a departure from verbal and fact-based instruction in favor of a "how-to" approach that replaces rigorous academics with hands-on activities. He called for a return to a

defined, knowledge-based, grade-by-grade curriculum as the most reliable way to close achievement gaps and ensure educational opportunity for all schoolchildren. Hirsch emphasized verbal proficiency and the importance of building a solid foundation in language and reading in grades pre-K-3.

“I think it would also be important for a policy maker to know just why the knowledge and vocabulary that is gained in these early years tend to be decisive for the rest of a person’s life,” Hirsch said. “...[unless] we make sure, starting in preschool and kindergarten and first grade that all the students in a classroom have the prerequisite knowledge and language to understand what is being said, we will arrive at the situation that now prevails in America – that initial disadvantage will tend to mean permanent disadvantage.”

Both President Birmingham and Professor Hirsch believe effective policies to close achievement gaps and provide equal educational opportunity must build on the proven foundation of content-rich liberal arts, not vague, subjective 21st-century skills.

Professor Hirsch and President Birmingham appeared together at a Pioneer event in March, “The Liberal Arts & Closing Achievement Gaps,” at which [Virginia Secretary of Education Gerard Robinson delivered the keynote address](#). The event was co-sponsored by Democrats for Education Reform, Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Concord Review, and the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Click the links below to read recent related Pioneer publications:

[Education Reform in Massachusetts: Aligning District Curricula with State Frameworks](#), White Paper (November 2006)

[How to Strengthen K-12 Mathematics Education in Massachusetts: Implications of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel’s Report](#), Policy Brief (June 2008)

[Strengthening Standards-Based Education: Recommendations to Policy Makers on 21st Century Skills](#), Policy Brief (November 2008)

[Core Academic Knowledge](#), Transcript of remarks delivered on December 16, 2008

[A Step Backwards: An Analysis of the 21st Century Skills Task Force Report](#), Policy Brief (February 2009)

[Writing Instruction in Massachusetts](#), Policy Brief (February 2010)

[The Sacred Fire of Liberty](#), Transcript of remarks delivered on March 31, 2010

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