



Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality

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With four simple truths as his framework, Charles Murray, the bestselling coauthor of *The Bell Curve*, sweeps away the hypocrisy, wishful thinking, and upside-down priorities that grip America's educational establishment.

Ability varies. Children differ in their ability to learn academic material. Doing our best for every child requires, above all else, that we embrace that simplest of truths. America's educational system does its best to ignore it.

Half of the children are below average. Many children cannot learn more than rudimentary reading and math. *Real Education* reviews what we know about the limits of what schools can do and the results of four decades of policies that require schools to divert huge resources to unattainable goals.

Too many people are going to college. Almost everyone should get training beyond high school, but the number of students who want, need, or can profit from four years of residential education at the college level is a fraction of the number of young people who are struggling to get a degree. We have set up a standard known as the BA, stripped it of its traditional content, and made it an artificial job qualification. Then we stigmatize everyone who doesn't get one. For most of America's young people, today's college system is a punishing anachronism.

America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted. An elite already runs the country, whether we like it or not. Since everything we watch, hear, and read is produced by that elite, and since every business and government department is run by that elite, it is time to start thinking about the kind of education needed by the young people who will run the country. The task is not to give them more advanced technical training, but to give them an education that will make them into wiser adults; not to pamper them, but to hold their feet to the fire.

The good news is that change is not only possible but already happening. *Real Education* describes the technological and economic trends that are creating options for parents who want the right education for their children, teachers who want to be free to teach again, and young people who want to find something they love doing and learn how to do it well. These are the people for whom *Real Education* was written. It is they, not the politicians or the educational establishment, who will bring American schools back to reality.

Twenty-four years ago, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* changed the way the nation thought about welfare. *Real Education* is about to do the same thing for America's schools.

Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality Details

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From Reader Review *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* for online ebook

Brian O'Leary says

Some good ideas, but mostly just babble. I have come to the conclusion that if someone writes a book about education it is because they are not successful at it and need to find a way to make a living off it by throwing education jargon around. I see it everyday.

Billie Pritchett says

I have mixed feelings about Charles Murray's *Real Education*, although I think he's partially right. The subtitle of the book is *Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*. Here are his four simple truths. The first basic truth is that ability varies. This is undoubtable, I think, and shouldn't be uncontroversial, but if it's taken seriously then it could help change the way school systems tend to do a one-size-fits-all education. So not everybody can be expected to master formal and informal logic or advanced mathematics, but neither could everyone be expected to master dance or painting.

What Murray writes as the second basic truth is that half of all children are below average. Murray argue this must be true by virtue of the law of distribution. On a normal bell-curve, it's natural that 50% of the people are performing below average, and 50% are performing above average. And the measure gets more nuanced, actually. For example, about 60% of all students are standard test measures are in the middle, 20% one standard deviation either way, and the number gets smaller as you move toward either extreme. While it's true that Murray is correct that the law of distribution applies to standard test measures and doesn't seem like it would change, it's hard to see what to do about this. Perhaps Murray's basic point is that accepting this reality will stop making people worry so much about pumping students up beyond this measure or inflating grades.

Murray's third basic truth is that too many people are going to college. He thinks if we accept the first basic truths, especially the second, we would realize that not everyone ought to go to college, and anyway, it cheapens what it means to hold a Bachelor of Arts degree or Bachelor of Science, when everyone is going for one, and then after enrollment virtually everyone can get one. I think Murray is probably right and that a university education should be for those who want to learn for learnings' sake and not go because it promises an opening on the job market.

The fourth basic truth is that America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted. Here, Murray argues that we can train the academically gifted to become the social and economic elite. This is perhaps the most troubling of his "truths." Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who are often dubbed 'academically gifted' also happen to come from affluent families because it's affluent families who can afford to give their children Ivy League higher education. This final "truth" might only be a good idea only if those who are dubbed the 'academically gifted' were truly able to be called or become academically gifted not through the social conditions or the economic system but on their own merit. But even then, there is a problem because any meritocratic system does not take the possibility for dumb luck or random failure into account, the sorts of mistakes people could make that could be life-changing. In a system that aspires to be meritocratic, those who don't succeed and those who do succeed are judged to be deserving of their positions, as if dumb luck never has any role. So I'm highly skeptical of this final clause.

It's true that there needs to be a lot of educational reform. But there would not be some institutional changes to what the really existing conditions are for that reform to take place. Some of these sorts of proposals were proposed by Howard Gardner in his book *Multiple Intelligences*. The basic idea is that children need to be guided, sure, but sort of left to find their own interests early in their life and then they can develop toward that interest. There might be a basic curriculum that students are expected to learn just to be considered a knowledgeable well rounded citizen but again childhood should be exploratory, and then work from there. I know these are flippant remarks I'm making, and they need further justification. But anyway, I'd recommend this book, even though I thought it was flawed.

Seth says

Murray has not cowered since his inflammatory IQ arguments in the mid 90's. Here, Murray argues that educational romantics are harming the least academically gifted children and the most academically gifted ones by ignoring inherent abilities. He cleverly uses Multiple Intelligence theory to argue that we must face inherent capacity no matter what natural aptitudes a child may have. He focuses on three of the seven general types of intelligence: spatial, logical, and verbal. These are the academic intelligences and more or less represent "g" (the thing IQ is testing to find).

The reason why this set up is so clever is because it disarms arguments about squabbling over what intelligence actually is. When someone dismisses that intelligence means something more broad than IQ, they distract themselves from academic aptitude. Thus, Murray uses the Multiple Intelligence set up to contextualize and concede that many intelligences exist but for the sake of education only three main types of intelligence are relevant.

I especially appreciate Murray's policy vision. He makes recommendations on improving upon the impotent system described. He would like educators to once and for all settle the question of whether its even possible to make dumb kids smart. His proposition is to spend whatever it takes on a sample group of dumb kids and teach them using all available methods and spend millions if necessary to do what it takes to make them smarter. He predicts that it won't substantially change these kids long term academic prowess.

Its a daring and refreshing argument which should at least be thought about by educators, policy makers, and voters.

"Cyril' (David says

An excellent book detailing why No Child Left Behind is both impossible, and undesirable. He warns about how in pushing all children to go to college we are doing a disservice to a great majority of them. He claims that between 2 - 3 times more students go to college than ought to. Part of this is because corporations have begun using a degree as a screening tool, even when the degree has little or nothing to do with an occupation. But part of it is also do to our erroneous assumption that everyone can handle college work. The plethora of misplaced students has been a catalyst that has destroyed liberal arts education.

One interesting point he makes is that students who may be superior auto mechanics, or electricians, or a practitioner of some other trade, looks at the mean salary for an occupation in which he is gifted, and the mean salary for, say a managerial position. What the student fails to realize is that if he is below average in

academic ability, and above average at his trade, by comparing means he is comparing apples and oranges.

Murray does do an admirable job of answering potential objections, but one he misses occurs during his contention that schools cannot improve outcomes significantly. I would have like to hear him temper his remark by juxtaposing our school system with those that regularly best us on TIMSS.

Vincent says

I was in the bookstore on Saturday, saw that Charles Murray had put out a new book, and said, "Dammit," because I knew I HAD to read it and therefore shell out \$25 for it.

He discusses four truths of contemporary American education. I think his first two truths (ability varies; half of all children are below average) are undebatable. Few would disagree with his fourth truth (America's future depends on the education of the academically gifted) on its face, but they might disagree with his recommendations for their education.

The third truth (too many kids go to college) is likely the most controversial, but also the one most worth reading. Murray argues convincingly that we're too obsessed with sending college-aged kids to college, which is different from educating college-aged kids. Never mind that a lot of kids aren't well-suited for college, but college doesn't provide what would be best for a lot of kids.

Anyhoo. Worth reading. The sad thing is that too many people will think, "Charles Murray? Isn't he that Bell Curve guy?" and dismiss the book entirely. Parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, education bureaucrats, and politicians at each level of government would do well to read this book and internalize its message.

Skylar Burris says

Real Education injects some much needed realism into the never-ceasing education debate. Charles Murray insists we must first dispense with "educational romanticism" before we can better serve students of all academic abilities. It's time, he argues, to admit some brutal truths:

1. By definition, half of all children are of below average academic ability.
2. Children cannot, in reality, be anything they want.
3. Too many people are going to college.
4. We are expecting too much of the lower half of students and too little of the upper twenty percent, and, in doing so, we are failing both.

Murray thinks it important to emphasize that "merit as a person and academic ability are different things" and stop sending the message that people are failures if they do not go to college. Yes, Murray says, we have to improve public education too, but even if we eschew progressive educational theories and return to traditional methods of teaching reading and math, even if we have the best possible schools and the best possible teachers, there is only so much we can improve reading and math scores for those of below average academic ability. Indeed, he points out, extensive research shows that there is limited correlation between the quality of schools and academic achievement; the largest positive correlation is family background.

We should, Murray agrees with many educational reformers, save children from truly abysmal schools through school choice, and we should improve the curriculum of schools by transmitting cultural literacy facts that simply are not being taught most places anymore. But we must acknowledge that natural ability limits how well children can do in the realm of reading comprehension and mathematical logic. Schools "have no choice but to leave some children behind." Not to neglect them, but not to promote them beyond their capabilities either. We have to stop punishing teachers because they cannot enable students to improve their math and reading scores to an unrealistic level.

Most of all, Murray thinks we need to conduct thorough research to determine what the real academic limits of the average child are and what really qualifies as "grade level" reading and math. "One of the most irresponsible trends in modern education has been the reduction in rigorous, systematic assessment of the abilities of all students in their care. To demand that students meet standards without regard to their academic ability is wrong and cruel to children who are unable to meet those standards." And when it comes to educating the "academically gifted" (and by this term he means something like the top 15-25 percent in intellectual ability), we have to emphasize that hard work is a greater virtue than chance brains; we have to challenge the academically gifted; we have to allow them to experience failure so that they can learn humility.

While I don't agree with all of his conclusions or proposals, I do think that, on the whole, Murray says something that desperately needs to be said, particularly with regard to college. The B.A. has become an extremely costly pre-requisite for a great many jobs for which it does not need to be (and at one time was not) a pre-requisite, and this greatly injures those who cannot afford, or do not have the intellectual rigor to obtain, a B.A. Certification for numerous jobs would be a better, more practical, and more affordable course to follow. Not everyone can handle an advanced liberal arts education; as for a basic liberal arts education, Murray argues that can and should be transmitted in elementary and high school, with a return to content based curriculum that focuses on cultural literacy. He describes how school choice is expanding, but we have to make it accessible to the poor as well, not just the wealthy.

I recently read another book on education called, *Dumbing Us Down*. In the book, John Taylor Gatto said that he really believes every child has the potential to be a genius. That bothered me deeply, but I couldn't quite put my finger on why. Isn't it good to be optimistic about our children, to expect the best of them, to not sell our children short? Don't children largely do what is expected of them, and won't setting low standards mean low performance? Well, yes and no. Children do tend to perform to expectations "within the limits of their abilities. Set low expectations for the academically gifted, and they will perform at a lower level than they are capable of. But what if you set expectations that are too high? Murray put his finger on what bothers me so much about this benighted "every child is a genius waiting to be discovered" optimism. We all know we have limits. Even if we are academically gifted, we can think of something in which we have no talent"music, art, athletics, public speaking"and think what it would be like (or what it was like) to be expected to perform at a level beyond our abilities. "When your smiling, well-meaning person in authority said, 'You can do it if you try,' *and you knew it was not true*, the well-meaning person was not raising your self-esteem. Not getting you to find untapped resources within you. He was humiliating you."

If we are not good at art, athletics, or music, we are generally allowed to bow out of competition in those areas. Not so in academics. "Only for linguistics and logical mathematical ability are we told that we can expect everyone to do well." Many children are pushed onto college prep tracts regardless of ability or interest, and if they really cannot handle the intellectual challenge, they are made to feel like failures rather than encouraged to excel within their limits. "This is not a call for woolly-headed niceness" or for inflating grades; rather, it is a call for the redefinition of academic success, a definition that would emphasize working hard rather than being smart. Murray insists that it can be counterproductive to praise children for being

smart. Better to praise them for working hard. Intelligence is a gift of birth not much within one's means to control; but working hard is a choice anyone can make.

It is not that we do not have good vocational training resources in this country, Murray argues. We do. It is just that we discourage too many children from taking advantage of them because of our misguided notion that everyone should strive to enter college. And the consequence is the deflation of the value of a B.A., a very expensive and time-consuming pre-requisite to workforce entry for many jobs, and a delay in maturity for many young men and women.

"Educational optimism" is a powerful force in today's public schools, and it has been enshrined in legislation through "No Child Left Behind." It is a fixture that will not be easy to dislodge in favor of a realism that may better benefit all students.

Mike Horne says

Good book, easy read (though I imagine easy to hate--very interested in reading some negative reviews). I don't think there is much I disagree with. Too many people go to college. And four years is too long. Teach kids lots of facts in k to 8th. Give smart people a chance to fail.

Leah Macvie says

This was the first book to really get me thinking about what our students really need. It sparked a passion. Great book, separated into 4 main sections, and backed by data and facts.

Linda says

I found myself agreeing with about 1/10 of what Murray says. Some of the rest of it I found downright frightening.

Talbot Hook says

Though some would rather lambast Charles Murray than read one of his works, he present ideas and concepts in this book enough to outlast his critics' rage. This book was written with the express purpose of blowing away the fog of wishful thinking, euphemism, and well-intended egalitarianism surrounding education - in fine, to do away with educational romanticism, or the idea that students can achieve anything, irrespective of personal desires, goals, or innate intelligence. What a fresh world that would be, should we be able to dispel the haze!

It would be redundant to go into too much depth concerning what the book argues, but, in short, these are Murray's Four Truths about education:

1) Abilities vary between students, and we *must* take these into account. Not all students can meet proficiency standards, no matter how hard we try, and some are simply not interested in the main skills that schools teach (mathematical-logical/linguistic skills).

2) Regardless of how we define "average", half of the students will always fall below it, by necessity. For many subjects in school, we don't expect students to break through the ground of excellence; we don't require everyone to become a skilled athlete, musician, or artist, yet we believe that each student can excel in mathematics and language if given the right pushes and opportunities. I don't think anyone's experience bears this out. Of course, we should push students to grow - and Murray repeats this *ad nauseum* (because he knows his critics will label him a defeatist, elitist, or some combination of such words) - but we should have different, realistic expectations for growth. Otherwise, we are hurting not only the system, but teachers and students: teachers, because they feel they have failed in teaching, and students, because they have either failed themselves or have been failed. And neither should be a necessary byproduct of education.

3) Too many students are going to college, and therefore our standards in college are almost non-existent, which has dragged the worth of a B.A. nearly to the level of the high-school diploma. Not only is college unnecessary for most people (those who would rather develop trade skills, or for those who simply don't have interest in pursuing anything that requires further learning), but when we encourage everyone to go, the standards must decrease to permit everyone entry and continued enrollment, and those that do not attend college feel lesser. Really, no one profits from this phenomenon - not the country, not the colleges, and certainly not the students and their families.

4) Unequivocally, this assertion is the most-easily misunderstood: America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted. Realizing this, Murray begins with a large caveat, which I will quote directly: "The proposition is not that America's future should depend on an elite that is educated to run the country, but that, whether we like it or not, American's future does depend on an elite that runs the country. The members of that elite are drawn overwhelmingly from among the academically gifted. We had better make sure that we do the best possible job of educating them." This elite expands far beyond CEOs and politicians, to local judges, school-board members, and journalists. The elite are those that shape the country, in a combined sense. How do we prepare such people to "lead"? The classical definition of education: a truly liberal one - an education steeped in the classics of all world traditions, wherein students are compelled to face a host of human questions of the deepest nature. I'm not sure there's a better form of education.

We can argue the efficacy of such changes, but, concerning their nature, they seem pretty indisputable. Ability varies, not everyone can hit the same targets, our colleges should not be the only path forward in life, and those that find themselves in leadership positions should be able to consider the Good and Just in all matters, for the good of us all.

Saunaguy says

<https://digitalsauna.wordpress.com/20...>

Logan Shannon says

I learned a few things about education that was eye opening but this book is more for research.

Melanie says

Point 1: Ability varies. Though there are multiple intelligences, it is a fallacy that everyone is particularly good at one or more, and there is a definite correlation between six of the seven (kinesthetic/physical is the one without any strongly observed correlation as of the writing, though athletes are more likely to be like Tiger Woods than Donte Stallworth). Also kids who are above average in one tend to also be above average in the other ones.

Point 2: Half of the kids are below average. This is statistical fact. Even if you raise the median, half of the kids will be below it, and Murray argues this is partly due to innate ability and partly due to family environment. Expensive plans by the state to raise scores haven't worked much over the past 50 or so years. (One thing he doesn't seem to explore is the idea from *Brain Rules for Baby* is that kids won't learn/retain/perform well if their basic needs like food/shelter/security are not being met, though again it seems like it would only raise the floor, and maybe the average, but half of the people would still be below the new average.) Not that raising the average is bad. Society benefits if everyone does better, even if each individual doesn't seem to benefit much.

Point 3: Too many people are going to college. Given the rigor of a traditional BA program, only maybe 15-25% of people are intellectually capable of handling it. Some even suggest that maybe only 10% of people have enough mathematical and linguistic ability to handle a liberal arts education. Obviously a lot more than that are going to college. Some flunk out, and grade inflation is rampant. Basically in order to make a college degree "worth it" most classes and schools are seriously dumbed down. He suggests that people should consider becoming experts in their field (even or especially if it's a trade) rather than being mediocre degree-holders. One quote from page 95: *In today's America, finding a first-rate lawyer or physician is easy. Finding first-rate skilled labor is hard.*"

For people who are college-bound, he suggests the current archetype of a four-year resident program from age 18-23 or so is quickly becoming obsolete or impractical. No one needs to spend four years on undergraduate coursework as a full-time profession. Improved communications and availability of other technologies are giving people alternatives to living and studying in one place. Also, spending four years cloistered in a university promotes extended adolescence and delays autonomy of kids.

Point 4: How we educate the gifted is important, because they'll be the up-and-coming elite, movers and changers, entrepreneurs, and what have you. He favors a strong statistical background, a strong background in logic, a strong background in rhetoric, and a strong background in ethics. Another thing is to properly ground gifted children, give them lessons in humility, stop with the ridiculous self-esteem building and "you're so smart" platitudes because they make kids risk-averse. All kids need to be challenged and tested until they find their absolute limits of understanding/capability. Colleges make it too easy for smart humanities/liberal arts majors to avoid difficult math and science classes.

He suggests de-emphasizing the BA and encouraging more professional certifications (like the CPA designation) in lieu of 4 year degrees from prestigious colleges (since too many people go there and often for the wrong reasons). He's also an advocate of early assessment of children's abilities and more choice in primary/secondary education.

Lynn says

Charles Murray wrote a few articles in the Wall Street Journal and expanded them into this book. The most memorable statement from both the articles and the book was that 50% of students are below average in educational ability. People took offense to this statement, not because he assumed students fall on a normal curve and he may have misused the term “average”, but because it offended their educational romanticism. If 50% of children are below average in educational attainment, 50% of children will always be left behind.

He wrote about a few things that I have disagreed with in previous blogs, including how important it is to get educational instruction in the humanities. I didn't think this was necessary since the top 10% he speaks of as needing this instruction are capable of teaching themselves. However, his arguments for a liberal education left me with doubts about my previous opinion. I could be wrong; maybe it is necessary to teach the humanities. Perhaps people can't just be taught how to think, they need inspirational instruction to think. In addition he convinced me that I have been neglecting some of the 7 types of intelligence, although it could be argued that most of what I ignored when discussing education in the past may not be open to instruction, especially in today's educational environment.

Here is the list of Murray's seven abilities:

1. Bodily-kinesthetic – from Leonard Hofstadter to Mark McGuire.
2. Musical – from the tone-deaf to Mozart
3. Spatial – This is more than the skills of Daniel Boone, it includes the spatial and mental visualizations of architects and engineers.
4. Linguistic – writing and understanding written material. I earlier questioned the radical assertion of Steven Landsburg, that you only need the Logical-mathematical ability and the linguistic will follow. I think item 5 is necessary for item 4, but not sufficient.
5. Logical-mathematical – This is probably the most important in doing well. It is highly correlated with 4, and moderately correlated with 3, 6 and 7 (my opinion, not necessarily Murray's). If you can't think logically, you can't do any of the other 4 items well.
6. Interpersonal – social intelligence; probably more correlated with 7 than 5.
7. Intrapersonal – self knowledge.

I'm not sure our existing educational system is designed to do the following well: 6, 7, 1, 3, and possibly 2. Everything seems geared to 4 and 5, and Murray shows why it's not well designed for even these two skills. I believe 4 without 5 results in a literary intellectual who cannot tell the difference between fashionable nonsense and sense. It does appear difficult to be lead down a post modernist, nonsensical belief system by concentrating primarily on 5 and excluding 4, but I can see where no understanding of 4 could handicap you with 6 and 7. In other words, it appears instruction in 4 is necessary, especially for the decision and rule makers of society. But a decision maker without 5 results in this.

The best indication something is wrong with education is the fact that anyone in the early 20th century could walk into a modern public classroom and know exactly what it is. Considering all the technological changes in other areas, that is an amazing and disheartening fact. Murray identifies what went wrong, and he proposes solutions that will upset every member of the educational establishment that is interested in keeping their job as it is (most union members). Since politicians cater to fashionable nonsense and the teachers unions, they are a big part of the problem.

I agree with almost all of Murray's conclusions about what is wrong, and almost all of his conclusions about

what needs to be done. Here is a quick summary. Quit educating as if we live in Lake Wobegone, where every kid is above average. Teach the core curriculum and quit wasting time on lesson plans in K-8. Don't use high school only as college prep. Start to assess the tracks kids should be on by ninth grade, and leave room for reversals. School choice is necessary to improve schools and encourage innovation. Don't use the BA as a filter for employer hiring. Employers should use certifications in most cases, not graduations.

I have personally seen how certifications are the best indicator for job skills in my occupation. A Microsoft Certification or a Cisco Certification was unbelievably reliable in predicting job success. The BA was virtually useless, although most of those certifying did have BA's. There are some occupations which may require a BA before certification, but only because it would be very difficult to certify without the background in the particular specialty.

When we can imagine Teddy Roosevelt walking into a school and not knowing where he is, that will be real education.

Kevin says

This book strips away the emotions and sentimentality often associated with education and tries to take a hard look at some trends in education and tries to confront some harsh realities about the current state of education. I thought this book presented some valid points, but omitted some needed discussion of the downside of certain approaches, and overweighted the importance of ability and downplayed the lack of effort. There are other books that delve into those issues, so he might be just rehashing what others have said, but it came across to me as a fairly incomplete book since it talked so exclusively about how college is best suited for those who excel academically and that much time and many resources are wasted on college for those who do not excel academically.

The book covers four main ideas: "Ability varies; half of the children are below average; Too many people are going to college; America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted." (13)

Murray first discusses how ability varies and half of children are below average. An interesting point was that the ability of some students is comparable, while the ability of others is vastly different. "They consist of two types: differences in degree and differences in kind... Those scores appropriately reflect differences in degree: Some fourth-graders can add and subtract faster and more accurately than others, but they are all doing the same thing and almost all children can be taught to add and subtract to some degree. The same is not true of calculus. If all children were put on a mathematics track that took them through calculus, and then were given a test of calculus problems, the resulting scores would not look like a bell curve. For a large proportion of children, the scores would not be merely low. They would be zero." (20) He thinks that college is best suited for those in the top 10-20% of the population, and that those below that would struggle mightily. He doesn't spend as much time discussing what college has become. There are a lot of easy college classes out there. You can get a 4.0 GPA without that much ability or effort, depending on the school and the classes you take. He makes a good point that isn't fair, but true, regarding the fact that not everyone is great at something – some people are just seemingly good at everything. "In the case of the three components of academic ability [spatial ability, logical-mathematical ability, and linguistic ability], the relationships are extremely close. It is a classic example of life not being fair. The child who knows all the answers in math class has a high probability of reading above grade level as well and, what's more, a higher than average

chance of being industrious and determined.” (30) Having decent academic ability, I could choose to do well or poorly academically based on my level of effort. That’s not necessarily true for everyone, though. There are many people who try very hard at math, for example, but quickly run into a brick wall that prevents them from advancing much further. It’s not a matter of effort, it’s that they’re maxing out on the results that can be gained from their particular level of ability. Being pushed harder even though you are trying as hard as you can (whether in math, running, or art) is not much fun. “The proposition on the table is that our best educational experiences were ones in which adults insisted we could do better when in fact we could do better; our worst educational experiences were ones in which adults insisted we could do better when in fact we could not do better.” (45) The end result of this is that he does not think that the same type of high school is best suited to everyone, and that a 4 year liberal arts degree is not a good fit for most people. “To demand that students meet standards that have been set without regard to their academic ability is wrong and cruel to the children who are unable to meet those standards. When I say that schools have no choice but to leave some children behind, I do not mean that the schools have no choice but to neglect them. Every student should have full opportunity to learn as much as he can learn. Rather, I mean that even the best schools will inevitably have students who do not perform at grade level. How many merely depends on how ambitiously grade level is defined.” (47) He does not view the quality of a school as that important (as long as it is at least mediocre) to outcomes. “To everyone’s shock, the Coleman Report instead found that the quality of schools explains almost nothing about differences in academic achievement. Measure such as the credentials of the teachers, the curriculum, the extensiveness and newness of physical facilities, money spent per student – none of the things that people assumed were important in explaining educational achievement were important in fact. Family background was far and away the most important factor in determining student achievement.” (58) He agrees that dreadful schools are bad, but is comparing mediocre schools with excellent ones. I think it’s important to have a candid conversation about how awful some schools are, with constant violence, disinterested teachers, and minimal learning going on. I get that it’s not the main focus of this book, but it seems incomplete to not spend more time acknowledging that. Another aspect I didn’t like was that results are observable, and effort, to a degree, is observable, but the thing that he views as most important and that should determine everything, ability, is not observable. That makes it very hard to properly put students into tracks based on ability. At the end of the day, I think some combination of ability and effort is important. “But the evidence does not give reason to expect that private or charter schools produce substantially higher test scores in math and reading among low-ability students who would otherwise go to normal public schools.” (66) While I wish he discussed effort more, he does make a good point that the sky is not the limit for everyone in every subject, so there might not be a huge difference in outcomes for the lowest ability students if they do not go to the best school, but you might see more of a difference in outcomes whether a higher ability student goes to a great versus a terrible school.

Murray next talks about how he thinks too many people are going to 4 year liberal arts colleges. I mostly agree with this. Employers are using degrees as a screening mechanism even though many jobs that now require college degrees don’t really need them. If the degree was costless in terms of time and money, it wouldn’t really matter, but that obviously isn’t the case. He argues that time spent on the job, learning the ropes is a better preparation for life than taking easy college classes that sometimes have more of an emphasis on fun than rigorous learning. He is a fan of having more rigor for younger students and having exposure to many subjects earlier, instead of college. “The facts can be fascinating (if taught right); a lost more than memorization is entailed; yet memorizing things is an indispensable part of education, too; and memorizing is something that children do much, much better than adults. The core knowledge is suited to ways that young children naturally learn and enjoy learning of comprehension, but the fact-based nature of the core knowledge actually works to the benefit of low-ability students – remembering facts is much easier than making inferences and deductions.” (77) “Saying ‘too many people are going to college’ is not the same as saying that the average student does not need to know about history, science, and great works of art, music, and literature. They do need to know – and to know more than they are currently learning. So let’s

teach it to them, but let's not wait for college to do it." (81) The "cost" of college from the standpoint of doing things you are good at and enjoy doing is much lower for higher ability students than for lower ability ones. "It is one of Aristotle's central themes in his discussion of human happiness, a theme that John Rawls later distilled into what he called the Aristotelian Principle: 'Other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.' And so it comes to pass that those who take the hardest majors and who enroll in courses that look most like an old-fashioned liberal education are concentrated among the students in the top percentiles of academic ability." (82) He also thinks people should gravitate toward careers where they can be excellent and not just mediocre. "Finally, there is an overarching consideration so important it is hard to express adequately: the satisfaction of being good at what one does for a living (and knowing it), compared to the melancholy of being mediocre at what one does for a living (and knowing it)...Even for students who have the academic ability to succeed in college, going directly to college may be a bad way for them to discover who they are and how they should make a living." (96) The flip side of this is that sometimes if you're really, really good at something, it can be a bit boring. Many people like challenges, and you're not going to be as stretched and continually improving if you're primarily doing things that you're already an expert at.

The section on educating the gifted makes sense, but wasn't as engaging to me. If everyone has the same floor of outcomes (accomplishing nothing), but some people have higher ceilings of outcomes of what they can accomplish with their life based on ability, it makes sense that the highest ability students have the widest set of possible outcomes. If a student is being mocked for studying and trying in classes, they likely won't reach their full potential. He also criticized the rigor of most elementary and grammar schools, suggesting we are not challenging students as much as we could early in life. "With math, rigor is accepted as part of the package. No one thinks that the purpose of a good advanced calculus class is to teach the students how to be creative. They are supposed to learn the mathematics of advanced calculus...The use of the word rigorous with the phrase verbal expression is oxymoronic in most public schools." (115) I mostly agree with that. Focusing resources on students that are going to have good outcomes and help them have great outcomes is going to be a tough sell, though.

Lastly, he discusses what needs to be done to change things. I think he has some interesting points, but they're not anything that is likely to happen. I would have been more impressed by ideas that had a chance of being implemented. He first discussed that it's important to acknowledge that children know that ability varies, and that it's acceptable to not pretend everyone is as good at everything as everyone else, or that we are all good, just at different things. "Regarding stigma, these two realities about children and childhood must be recognized: First, adults do not have the option of concealing the truth. Kids know, no matter what. When children of widely varying abilities are mixed in classes, their differences are highlighted, not obscured. If the teacher calls on the children equally, then the deficits of the slower children are put on display for all their classmates to see. If the teacher calls only on the brighter children who know the answers, the kids quickly figure out what is going on...Merit as a person and academic ability are different things. The second reality is that every child is miserable about some personal defect...Poor performance in the classroom is just one of a long list of things that make children cry into their pillows at night. It is not even close to the top of the list." (146) He made some good points about the motivations of students in high school that are not pursuing 4 year colleges. "Work-bound students rightly perceive that employers of high-school graduates do not pay much attention to grades. In a large national survey, grades were said by employers to be one of the least important factors in hiring high-school graduates. Even if they are planning to go to a community college, students also rightly understand that most community colleges have open admissions." (147) That hadn't really stood out to me before. He advocates having more technical training offered and pushed in high school to better prepare students who are not going to college for the job market. It was not a major theme, but I thought he made a good point about how more information is communicated

from a degree from a prestigious school than from a less prestigious one. “Employers are not being snobs when they give edges based on where the degree comes from. A degree from Cornell conveys information that a degree from the University of New Hampshire does not, and a degree from the University of New Hampshire conveys information that a degree from a no-name online school does not, even when the ability and knowledge of the people holding those degrees is identical.” (155) He then suggests certification (along the lines of a CPA) to determine readiness rather than a degree. I think this could be possible if a large company like Facebook or Google started doing it. If they charged between \$50 and \$100 for the certification, and that was a prerequisite to get employment there, it could catch on. Given the information conveyed, it could then grow into something that other companies would see the value in and people could get even if they didn’t want to work at the company that was offering the certification. I thought the comments on technical education overall were good, but wished he had some more concrete examples, a clearer path to implement it, and more concrete benefits from such a policy.

Overall, I thought this book presented some uncomfortable ideas about students and the education system, but was a little incomplete in that it didn’t sufficiently discuss effort and did not contain much conciliatory compassion for the people it had relegated to less academically-focused schools. It did not try to present much of the possible downside to pursuing such policies was, and because of its unapologetic tone, seems less likely to be implemented. I’m a person who likes real implementable change, and I felt like this book was not as well-developed in that respect as it could have been.

Allison says

Murray argues "The goal of education is to bring children into adulthood having discovered things they enjoy doing and doing them at the outermost limits of their potential. The goal applies equally to every child, across the entire range of every ability." (This is not the same as preparing all students to be college-ready, which is the apparent goal of most current educational policy). This book explores many differences between current and ideal practices and is extremely rich food for thought. These topics would be of interest to all education administrators, particularly those in secondary and post-secondary settings.

James Carter says

Initially, in *Real Education*, I was getting worried when Charles Murray began the discussion about Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which has never been validated in research. Then, he finally righted the ship and went on to reinforce his original position as established in his other book, *The Bell Curve*, with Richard Herrnstein.

The rest of the book has been what I thought about kids in general that half of them are below average in all abilities, not all are capable of doing college work (he said 90% when I thought it was 70%), far too many are going to college, and the truly gifted and talented are being undereducated. It's been true based on my experience of teaching high school mathematics, having worked with just about everybody: white, black, Hispanics, Ivy Leaguers, and kids with disabilities and from Title I schools. IQ is the most common denominator in terms of predicting their academic success, and I could easily tell by how quickly they could

process math, how often I had to teach the material, and how long they retained it in their heads.

I eventually gave up teaching and went into the private sector for several reasons. One, I had no support from the administrators, co-teachers, and parents. They all complained that I was being too hard, that I didn't care about sports (students were spending far too much time away from classes because of sports), and that I cared about preparing the students for life after high school. I had become a highly paid babysitter. Two, the principal wouldn't keep disruptive students out of my classes after I threw them out; instead, one or two stayed for the duration of the period and ruined the learning environment for the rest of everybody else. Three, far too many students were in advanced math classes when they should have never moved out of general math classes (think of AP Calculus when they should have stayed in 4th grade math permanently; yes, it happened quite often).

Chapter 4 of *Real Education* lost me for a quite bit with the author going off on a tangent, hence, the rating of '4' out of 5. Chapter 5 is not bad, and I like the author's proposal, which is something I had thought about for a while. In fact, I would like to see the results because his predictions will become totally true, but these fake donors won't fund the experiment because they don't want to admit the inevitable; that's why they continue to give money, so they can look good when they are being judged by historians and buy an admission ticket to "heaven" or wherever the hell that is.

All in all, *Real Education* won't make a difference because the majority of administrators, teachers, and parents in K-12 don't want to bother with making a difference in academics or admit the truth that more than half of their students are, in fact, dumb and suck across the board.

Frederick Hammill says

He has no idea what he's talking about.

Bojan Tunguz says

Charles Murray is one of the best known researchers and writers on various public policy topics. He is oftentimes maligned due to the fact that many of his positions and arguments fly in the face of the popular wisdom and challenge some of our most cherished prejudices. In the case of education, those prejudices have been the source of countless "reforms" that have had very little, if any, impact on the actual achievements of students they were meant to help. The latest one of those attempts, the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) was the immediate inspiration of a series of articles that Charles Murray wrote for the Wall Street Journal. Those articles have been expanded and turned into this book. Because of politically sensitive nature of the topic, Murray is banding backwards to try to make his assumption as uncontroversial as possible and avoid for the most part the minefields of race, class and gender. The four assumptions that he bases all of his arguments are the following:

1. Ability varies.
2. Half of the children are below average.
3. Too many people are going to college.
4. America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted.

The veracity of some of these assumptions can hardly be questioned - the second one is just a tautology. However, most people don't look education or their intellectual ability rationally, so it is worthwhile emphasizing the obvious. On the other hand the last two assumptions are very politically unpopular, and Murray expends considerable amount of space in backing them up and presenting the best possible arguments in their favor.

Unfortunately, I am not too optimistic that this book will have much of an impact on people who really need to make hard political choices. The real hope for change lays elsewhere - in an increasing number of technological and social developments that will create new pressures on the traditional educational system. The advent of the internet and the growing amount of resources for learning outside of the established educational venues will create an incentive for more flexible and diverse educational experience. The globalization of work will create pressures on schools and colleges to become more open to changes that will bring them in line with reality. In a meanwhile, we have to be grateful that there are people out there like Charles Murray who are willing to write so clearly and persuasively about these issues.

This is also probably Charles Murray's most accessible book so far. It is written in a conversational/polemic style with no footnotes, graphs, or tables. It is a very straightforward read and could be finished in a single sitting. Overall, there is so much going for this book that I really hope it will be read by a very wide audience.

John McCarthy says

Wow. I understand why liberal progressives do not want him to freely express his thoughts and ideas at any college campus. This book is a finely executed savage blow to the current state of big education.
