

THE FUND FOR CLASSICAL EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

“The philosophy in the classroom in one generation is the philosophy of the government in the next”
Abraham Lincoln

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Which two American presidents were educationally disadvantaged? Which two logged the least classroom hours and, at life’s end, had not a single degree or diploma between them?

George Washington was educated at home by his father and eldest brother until his eleventh year, when his father died. His total time in a classroom was about two years. Yet, by the time he was thirteen, he learned geometry, trigonometry, surveying and astronomy. He studied legal forms including bills of exchange, tobacco receipts, leases, and patents so that from these he could deduce the theory, philosophy and custom behind the law.

Lincoln, who had only eighteen months of “blab school” in which he gained the equivalent of a first grade education, would pile sticks of dry wood into the log cabin’s fireplace and stretch out on the floor with open books. He would write his arithmetic sums on a large wooden shovel with a piece of charcoal. Nightly, he would use his jack-knife to whittle the surface clean, ready for more ciphering. Pencils and paper were luxuries the Lincolns could not afford.

We have come a long way! Today, we have universal access to schooling. From pre-schools to professional schools, we spend our lives matriculating, regurgitating and graduating. And yet, according to the recently released “National Report Card,” only 37% of America’s 4th graders read at or above the “proficient” level. By 8th grade, that number drops to 33%.

In fact, the NAAL (National Assessment of Adult Literacy) has again substantiated what all educational historians have long known—that the number of adults in the U.S. who cannot read or write has “steadily increased over the years.” Among the 205 nations included in their 2008 research, the U.S. ranks 27th in basic literacy—at the very bottom of industrialized nations!

Maybe we should rethink the education of Washington and Lincoln. They seemed to turn out all right! Three things can be said about their education—things which cannot be said of millions who are being warehoused in schools today.

First, both Washington and Lincoln could read—and they did. From the mid 17th century, in both New England and the Middle Colonies, reading was highly valued and literacy was virtually universal. In the South and the new West, the written word was also prized and literacy, though not universal, was the norm. Across the new nation, literacy rates were significantly higher than anywhere in Europe and much higher than they are in America today.

Second, both Washington and Lincoln tended to read “great books.” In the middle of the 18th century the average colonial family owned less than twenty books—but they were great books. From Maine to Georgia, families read the Bible, Testaments, Psalters and Catechisms. Many owned a copy of *Pilgrims’ Progress* or *Foxes Book of Martyrs*. Most had some published sermons of prominent English divines and a hymnbook or two. Some families might even have obtained a copy of Plutarch’s *Lives*.

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By his eighteenth year, Washington had devoured all the writings of Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Daniel Defoe and read regularly the famous and elegant *Spectator*. He also read Seneca's *Morals*, Julius Caesar's *Commentaries*, and the major writing of other Roman generals like the historian Tacitus.

Along with *Dilworth's Spelling Book* and *The Kentucky Preceptor*, Abraham Lincoln's boyhood reading list included *Aesop's Fables*, *Arabian Nights*, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Life of Francis Marion*, *The Life of George Washington* and *Lessons in Elocution*. Throughout his life, he returned again and again to the *Bible*, Shakespeare, Byron, Burns, Euclid, Poe, Milton, Defoe and Thomas Paine.

Third, both Washington and Lincoln read specifically for moral improvement. Washington, who preferred dancing and horsemanship to book learning, set himself to becoming a gentleman. He chose to copy, study and edit 110 *Rules of Civility* written and taught by French Jesuits. This boyhood exercise, internalized, became a source of his remarkable character and bearing.

Lincoln's brief "blab school" experience consisted of hearing verbal instruction, reciting poems, rules of grammar and moral aphorisms. The real school that shaped his boyhood was the Separate Baptist Church Sunday School. The church where Thomas Lincoln faithfully brought his family was a primitive religious society that set high moral standards, frowned on alcohol consumption and dancing, and vigorously opposed slavery.

By their early teens, both Washington and Lincoln had secured for themselves a level of liberal education that eludes most college graduates today. More importantly, they knew the difference between right and wrong. The glorious trajectory of their lives was set.

What value is schooling if it does not fill the mind with a true light, make a boy or girl sensible of their moral duty, and kindle in their hearts humility under heaven and charity toward their neighbor? What nation can survive schools that barely instruct and almost never inspire?

At the new Alexandria Academy, students will have their fill of science, math & technology. But they will also learn their Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton and Keats. They will study bio-systems and build robotic grids. But they will also pour over biographies of the worthies who have gone before them and chart out a noble course for their own lives.

The main end of the Academy is *not* to train workers able to "compete in the global economy." It is to raise up a new generation who will serve the world through their character and leadership. Re-opening the Academy is a revolutionary act—and it is high time for a revolution.

I am not too proud to beg and plead for your help. Financially, this is the most challenging time. Tuition revenues do not begin to flow until the middle of summer. *Today*, we need nine more individuals to scholarship one worthy student. We need others who will furnish a classroom or provide one school master's salary. America's young people don't need more schooling. They need an education. To this end, I remain,

Your Obed Servt

T. Robinson Ahlstrom, Chairman