# Education as It Was Meant to Be






**Jill Garner** | Manners of the Heart

COMMENTARY

The purpose of education has been strategically redefined. And I believe it is one of the greatest tragedies of our nation's 250-year history. We have abandoned the moral formation of children in favor of an institutional process mandated by the state.

Dictionaries record how a culture understands its words. By tracing the definition of education across two centuries, we see far more than changing language. We witness a profound philosophical shift in our culture.

Our founders' understanding of education stands in stark contrast to that of today's leaders. The evolving definition of education reveals how far we have drifted.

## The Original Intent of Education

In 1828, 52 years after the founding of the United States of America, Noah Webster published an all-encompassing definition of education for our new republic. It read:

*"Education comprehends that series of instruction and discipline which is intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, and form the manners and habits of youth, and fit them for usefulness in their future stations. To give children a good education in manners, arts and science, is important; to give them a religious education is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties."*

The priorities could not be clearer. The formation of the heart was of utmost concern. Knowledge was inseparable from moral formation. How children interacted with others was paramount. Preparing children for their purpose in life was the goal. And parents were directly responsible for the education of their children.

A decade later, Horace Mann (the "father of public schools") introduced a new perspective on education that de-emphasized biblical teaching of morals in favor of a more universal understanding. That shift laid the groundwork for the institution to increasingly replace Scripture as the primary moral authority in public education (and would ultimately reshape the definition of education itself).

In 1864, Webster's refined and clarified the definition:

*"Education, properly a drawing forth, implies not so much the communication of knowledge as the discipline of the intellect, the establishment of the principles, and the regulation of the heart."*

This understanding remained anchored in biblical teachings of the heart as the wellspring of thought, behavior, attitudes, and affection. The "communication of knowledge" was not dismissed as unimportant, only incomplete by itself.

Knowledge answers the question, *What can I do?* Principles answer the more important question, *What should I do?*

Facts can fill the mind, but they cannot direct a life.

## The Rise of Progressive Education

As public education expanded, the shift Mann initiated gained momentum. We moved further away from the Bible as the foundational textbook and increasingly turned to the works of psychologists.

The "father of progressive education," John Dewey, gave us "Democracy and Education" in 1916. While many of his assertions had merit, the underpinning of his beliefs rested on assumptions contrary to Scripture.

Influenced by Charles Darwin and the pragmatic psychology of William James, whose writings laid

the groundwork for the concept of self-esteem (the rise and fallacy of which will be examined in a later essay), Dewey argued that education should be grounded in human reason rather than biblical truth. It is no surprise he was one of the 34 original signatories of the 1933 "*Humanist Manifesto*."

With Dewey's proclamation that "the educational process has no end beyond itself," the purpose of education shifted to the transmission of information rather than the acquisition of wisdom. By the 1940s, progressive education had become firmly established, widening the formation gap between intellectual development and the education of the heart.

Meanwhile, Webster's retained the original intent of education in condensed form. The 1940 edition defined education as: "the training up of youth for their station in life in the areas of mental, physical, and moral development."

## The Acceleration of Change

As education moved further from its original intent, heart formation was relegated to the margins. Children were given facts and figures without moral anchors. More information, less wisdom.

The 1950s launched a wave of educational programs to improve academic achievement and manage behavioral issues. While a few were beneficial, others caused profound changes that left disappointing, if not devastating, consequences. The old adage, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything," aptly describes the continual reinvention of modern education.

In 1966, Webster's adopted a more mechanical definition of education. Education was now defined as: "the systematic study of the problems, methods, and theories of teaching and learning."

Any mention of the heart had disappeared.

## Philosophical Shift in Our Culture

Today, Webster's 2026 edition defines education as: "the field of study that deals mainly with methods of teaching and learning in schools."

This modern definition is not the cause of our educational decline; it is the evidence of it. All process, no purpose. It explains how education operates but not why it exists. The question is no longer, *Who is this child becoming?* but *What does this child know?*

We fill the mind and forget the heart.

Without heart knowledge, head knowledge is dangerous.

The results speak for themselves. We are producing generations more informed than ever, yet increasingly anxious, divided, disrespectful, and uncertain of who they are. Information alone cannot cultivate integrity. Knowledge cannot produce self-control. Academic success cannot substitute for moral wisdom.

Long before Noah Webster, Scripture taught the attitudes, desires, convictions, and loves of the heart determine how knowledge is received and used. See Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45, and Matthew 15:18-19.

The heart is not peripheral to education. It is the foundation.

If we hope to reverse the troubling trajectory of our children and our nation, we must restore education as it was meant to be:

"*...to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, and form the manners and habits of youth, and fit them for usefulness in their future stations. To give children a good education in manners, arts and science, is important; to give them a religious education is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties.*"

Perhaps the greatest question facing America after 250 years is not whether we can improve education. It is whether we have the courage to reclaim it.

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Jill Garner, author, speaker, and founder of *Manners of the Heart*, has devoted more than two decades to restoring respect and cultivating character in the next generation. Through her groundbreaking approach to *Heart Education*, she equips parents, educators, and churches to reach beyond outward behavior to shape the hearts of children. Jill's parenting books include *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* and *StrongHeart: Cultivating humility, respect, and resiliency in your child.*

In her thought-provoking series, *The Formation Gap*, Jill boldly challenges the cultural assumptions shaping today's children and families—from the loss of manners and morals to the dangers of a self-esteem-centered culture. With biblical conviction and practical wisdom, she calls us back to a timeless truth: The content of the heart determines what we think, say, and do. To change our culture, we must first change our hearts.

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