

Education is Not Magic

Americans have traditionally expected more of education than it was capable of delivering by itself. In recent decades, many have looked to education as the means of solving poverty, inequality, and a number of other woes that plague our society. Of course, details of *how* education will do this are usually omitted.

In his important 1965 essay ["Education and the Individual,"](#) former University of Chicago professor Richard Weaver gives expression to the vague, utopian ambitions that are often attached to education:

"An alarming percentage of our citizens, it is to be feared, stop with the word 'education' itself. It is for them a kind of conjuror's word, which is expected to work miracles by the very utterance. If politics become selfish and shortsighted, the cure that comes to mind is 'education.' If juvenile delinquency is rampant, 'education' is expected to provide the remedy. If the cultural level of popular entertainment declines, 'education' is thought of hopefully as the means of arresting the downward trend, People expect to be saved by a word when they cannot even give content to the word."

As Weaver reminds us, "education" is not magic. In fact, it's just the word for a process by which individuals are initiated into a culture. *What* that culture values, and the moral formation of its members, matter just as much if not more than the educational process itself. Without the former, the latter cannot possibly be effective. If there is not a clear idea of what we want students to learn, and the character formation necessary to learn it, education will be powerless to do anything to improve society.

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